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Prologue

"ShadowClan, attack!"

Rippletail's battle cry echoed in the air, the ginger tom leaping into the mass of cats below. Batchaser wasn't far behind him, outstretching his claws to meet the throat of a distracted ThunderClan warrior.

He latched himself onto the brown tom, the two cats rolling in the dirt. The black tom slashed his claws down Paleheart's cheek, kicking the other tom off of him.

"ShadowClan scum!" Paleheart spat as he staggered to his paws, blood dripping down his face. "You've always been ignorant enough to believe you owned our territory!"

"ThunderClan is fat." Batchaser drew his lips back into a snarl. "You need no extra prey!"

A fire blazed in Paleheart's eyes as he whacked Batchaser in the nose. The black tom stumbled back and narrowed his eyes. "The kittypet can fight, eh?"

"I'm not a kittypet!" the tom growled.

Batchaser snickered. "ThunderClan brings so many in, I don't even know who's Clanborn anymore."

Not even responding, Paleheart leapt forward and aimed for the ShadowClan warrior's exposed neck. Batchaser thought quickly and ducked his head, smashing headfirst into the other tom. Paleheart yowled in shock and hit the ground. The black tom gritted his teeth as pain shot through his head.

"Y-You'll never take this territory," Paleheart stammered in determination. "We won't let you."

"Your Clan of kittypets won't stop our Clan of warriors,"

Batchaser scowled. "Maybe it'll teach you a lesson not to be so welcoming to every cat you come across."

"ThunderClan is strong because of our kindness!" Paleheart hissed. "Unlike *your* Clan, we're liked."

"We're *feared*." Batchaser bared his teeth. "You're fools to try and mess with us. You'll learn soon enough."

"ThunderClan will take it's chances." The brown tom thrust his head toward Batchaser, ripping his pearly white claws through the tom's ear. The ShadowClan warrior shrieked in fury and backpedaled, eyes widening as blood ran down his face.

"Now you know how it feels," Paleheart spat. "Get out of here while you still can."

"'*I'll take my chances*,'" Batchaser mimicked the ThunderClan tom.

"Then you will regret your choice."

Batchaser felt the wind get knocked out of him when a cat smashed into his side. He gasped for breath as he hit the muddy ground, a brown color splattering over his fur.

A small white tom was standing over him, smirking. "Not so tough now, are you?"

"I'm not afraid of kittypets," Batchaser snarled, using his hind legs to kick the white tom's jaw. The apprentice's eyes widened as he leapt back, stumbling around as though he were dizzy.

Finding his chance, the ShadowClan warrior leapt to his paws, able to breathe again, and aimed his claws toward the white tom's throat. He yowled in surprise when he was pulled back. Batchaser swiveled his head around and noticed Paleheart's jaws wrapped around his tail.

The black tom turned and crashed into the warrior. He then felt a pair of five claws insert themselves into his back. He closed his eyes and let out a shriek when crimson red blood dripped down his flank, the apprentice's claws sinking deeper into his skin.

Paleheart narrowed his eyes when he noticed Batchaser's pain, proceeding to bite into the black warrior's throat and rip it open. The ShadowClan tom opened his jaws and let out a horrified shriek as black spots edged his vision.

He fell to his side, gasping for any air he could catch his breath on. Blood pooled around his body, Paleheart and the apprentice running off and leaping onto other ShadowClan cats.

Nothing felt real anymore. A gray pelt flashed in front of his eyes, ShadowClan's medicine cat staring at Batchaser in horror. The she-cat was trying to talk to him, but he couldn't respond. He didn't know why Cloudflame cared. He was going to die. She should be treating other cats, not him.

He shook his head and let his head fall. He had no energy or strength. He curled his claws in as pain seared through his body.

Batchaser took his last dying breath, the darkness covering his vision once and for all. When the pain disappeared, the ShadowClan warrior opened his blue eyes and was greeted with a beautiful world full of stars.

StarClan.

A/N: Welcome, everyone! New book! This idea is based off of a roleplay I had with @/FallingSkies89, but I'm using different characters. I'm very excited to write this book and I hope you enjoy it! Please vote and comment your thoughts, and may StarClan light your path✧

Chapter 1 || Remembrance

The black tom eyed the mouse with sharp blue eyes. He kept completely still, his ears flattened and his tail straightened out. The former ShadowClan tom licked his lips and leapt forward, landing squarely on the mouse. It let out a squeak of alarm but Batchaser silenced it with a killing bite.

He crouched down and tore a piece of flesh off of the mouse. He chewed and looked around the forest, happy he was finally being left alone. An annoyed growl rumbled in the back of his throat. *About time.*

Apparently, Batchaser was supposed to send omens and prophecies to his former Clanmates. Yewstar, that old hag, had chewed him out for never visiting them.

How is it my problem if they live or die? Batchaser thought, tearing off another morsel. *I don't care what happens down there! I'm up here, and I'm not going to be some prophecy-obsessed, idiotic, mysterious kitty. No one can make me.*

The black tom shrugged and stood up, outstretching his paws and arching his back. His jaws split into a yawn and he closed his eyes. *This* was luxury!

The former ShadowClan warrior turned, abandoning his mouse, and trekked on through the forest path. Batchaser flicked an ear, looking around at the trees. *Maybe if I'm annoyed with cats telling me what to do all the time, I can just come here. I haven't seen any cat in this forest all day. It's a good hideout.*

Batchaser let out a startled yowl when he saw a flash of splotched fur. When claws dug into his flank, he wheeled around and noticed a small tortoiseshell she-cat clawing at his pelt. Furious, Batchaser grabbed the she-cat and threw her off, watching her kick up dirt as she hit the ground. *I spoke too soon.*

"What were you doing?!" Batchaser spat.

"I was practicing my stalking skills!" she responded, narrowing her green eyes. "Why did you do that to me? That hurt, you know!"

The blue-eyed tom's claws dug into the ground. "This is StarClan, kit! Not the forest down with the living. Learn to respect the warriors of your Clan."

She stood to her paws, lashing her tail. "Whatever! I don't have time to argue with fish-brains like you."

Batchaser curled his lip. "You are young and disrespectful. No wonder you're dead."

The she-cat froze. She stared at Batchaser in shock, then lashed out at him in fury. The black tom grabbed her flank and forced her to the ground, placing a paw on her chest.

"Try and attack me one more time," Batchaser began, furious, "and you'll know what it's like to have *real* wounds."

The she-cat groaned and the former ShadowClan warrior let her up. She glared at him. "I'm gonna tell Jackalstar about this! She won't be happy with you."

Batchaser snarled. "I don't care if she's happy or not. She's not my parent, she wasn't even a *Clanmate*, so go ahead and waste your time with her."

The tortoiseshell she-cat hissed at him and turned on her heel, raising her head high in the air and puffing out her chest as she exited the clearing. Batchaser watched her go, claws itching to rip through her stupid little ears. *She deserves it!*

The black tom sighed and rolled his eyes. *I guess this isn't a good place to stay. That means I'll have to find somewhere else to go*.

Batchaser flicked his tail and padded on. He had been happy a second ago, but now something was eating away at him. It made his stomach churn. But he didn't know what it was.

Why are you worried? Batchaser scowled. *Stop being a scaredy-cat.*

But even then he couldn't control it. Batchaser stopped when he remembered a name. A name he was supposed to have forgotten. That brainless apprentice had just reminded him of this cat.

Paleheart.

A/N: Woah! I'm actually updating this book really fast! I'm so excited to write this and I hope you guys are pumped as well!! Please vote and comment your thoughts, and may StarClan light your path✧
(Also, this chapter was deleted and rewritten for anyone that read the last version, just so you know and aren't confused!)

Chapter 2 || Revenge

[image]

Batchaser exited the forest, staring down at his paws. Why did he remember? StarClan cats were supposed to forget how they died. So..why did *he* remember?

The black tom's claws sunk into the ground. Paleheart had killed him mercilessly. He'd ripped open his throat without even thinking twice and leapt right back into battle.

Anger lapped at his belly. It felt like a fireball was being summoned in his stomach. Killing another cat was against the warrior code. *Maybe Paleheart was punished. But it* has *been a while since I died, so it wouldn't even matter. Unless he was exiled*. Batchaser doubted it. Doestar probably didn't even know what her stupid warrior had done.

The black tom pondered for a few moments. He had an idea. It wasn't something good, but he wanted revenge against Paleheart. Anything.

Paleheart has a mate, right? And kits? Batchaser smirked. He could make a fake prophecy. Send Paleheart spiraling into a deep hole of terror and paranoia. He wanted to. So badly. But how would he? He'd never sent a prophecy or omen, despite being told to so many times.

The tom flicked an ear. He'd have to follow someone and find out where he could contact the living cats of the Clans.

One cat crossed his mind -- *Jackalstar*. The she-cat had been the former leader of ThunderClan, and always seemed to be talking to her former Clanmates. *I'll follow her. She can lead me to wherever they go to visit dreams*.

Batchaser scanned the lands. There was a beautiful sparkling river that ran under a rock that allowed cats to walk from either

side. A huge moor was located to the right of the river, a dark forest hardly visible. It was a mixture between oak and pine trees. The black tom usually stayed in this forest, however.

Shaking his head, he ran down the slope and looked for any cat he could. He spotted a white tabby she-cat licking her paw, laughing at a brown tabby tom that accidentally fell in the river. Batchaser narrowed his eyes as he padded closer to them. The she-cat noticed him and turned his way, the tom staggering to his paws and watching Batchaser near the duo.

"Hello," the she-cat greeted with a purr. "What brings you here?"

Batchaser flicked an ear. "Do you know where Jackalstar is?"

The she-cat nodded. "Yes." She pointed with her tail to the forest past the moor. "Just down there. You should spot her."

"Why are you looking for her?" the brown tabby tom inquired as he stepped out of the river, shaking the water out from his pelt. His fur instantly became dry, as if he hadn't even gotten it wet.

Batchaser shrugged and didn't reply, beginning to pad away.

"Hey! I asked you a question!" the tom called, running after him. Batchaser reeled on him and thrust his muzzle into his face, a growl rumbling deep in his throat.

"I heard you," the black tom snarled. "I just didn't bother to answer you."

The brown tabby's hackles rose and he took a step back, narrowing his yellow eyes. "Fine. I was just trying to be nice." He turned and walked back to his friend, or mate, whatever they were, and eyed Batchaser as he sprinted across the moor.

The black tom looked around as he ran. *Jackalstar...I could easily spot her in a gathering, so why can't I find her now?* She had brown patches over a snowy-white pelt and fiery blue eyes tinged with an amber-yellow color. Definitely recognizable.

His heart soared when he spotted her. She was walking

alongside a gray tom with black splotches near the forest. She didn't even notice Batchaser as he dove behind a bush, flattening his ears as he stalked after them.

The black tom felt content as he followed them. *Jackalstar might just lead me to where I need to go, and if so, I'm going to get my revenge on Paleheart. What more could I ask for?*

A/N: This chapter wasn't great, but I'm trying to stay positive. I have a lot planned for this book and I'm not going to start pounding myself with criticism already. It was a little rushed but, nevertheless, I hope you liked it anyway!

Please vote and comment your thoughts, and may StarClan light your path✧

Chapter 3 || Secret Knowledge

The black tom had been stalking after Jackalstar and her companion for a while now. Batchaser noticed that, as they walked farther from the heart of StarClan, the sky began to grow dark. He narrowed his blue eyes, shaking his head and scurrying through the brambles to catch up to the two cats.

He angled his ears, trying to catch what Jackalstar was saying to the gray-and-black tom.

"This is serious, Galewhisker!" Jackalstar hissed, whipping to the tom.

"I'm not saying it's not," Galewhisker responded calmly, padding and leaving the white she-cat to catch up to him. Batchaser was intrigued. What were they talking about?

"Then maybe you should be a little more worried than you are now," she growled, her claws sinking into the ground with each pawstep.

"I don't need you to tell me how to feel," the gray tom replied. "I'm capable of that myself."

"Clearly you need a lesson, then." Jackalstar shook her head. "This omen...it will shape the future of every Clan cat for the rest of eternity. If they don't take it seriously, the Clans will fall."

Galewhisker flicked an ear and didn't reply. They walked on in silence. The former ShadowClan warrior flexed his claws as the sky was changing into a navy color. He swiveled his head around, the light of day behind him where the center of StarClan was.

When Batchaser turned his head back around, Jackalstar and Galewhisker were gone. His eyes widened and he ran up the slope, not caring about being spotted at this point. The black tom looked around frantically. *I can't lose them!*

"Well, well, well, what do we have here?" a voice snickered from behind him.

Batchaser whipped around, recognizing the voice as Jackalstar's. Her eyes held a challenge and she had the posture to tell anyone she had absolute authority. Galewhisker padded up behind her, staying silent as he observed the former ShadowClan warrior.

"Just exploring." Batchaser flicked his tail and locked eyes with Jackalstar, not flinching away.

The she-cat let out a chuckle. "You're never *just* exploring." She circled around him, looking the tom up and down. "After all, you are from ShadowClan."

"And because you're from ThunderClan, that gives you the right to nose around in another Clan's business?" Batchaser raised a brow at her.

"Jackalstar," Galewhisker called, voice deep and gravelly. "We should get out of here."

"No." She narrowed her blue eyes at Batchaser. "We need to find out what he overheard."

"Oh?" Batchaser acted surprised. "What kind of secrets should we know about?"

Jackalstar and Galewhisker looked at each other before turning back to the black tom. "It's an omen. And the cats receiving it will be deciding every Clan's future."

"Who are these cats?" Batchaser questioned. "I hope it's not just ThunderClan, but I suppose it doesn't matter; you guys *are* every cat's savior! Why would we ever defy you? You should just take the place of StarClan itself!"

"Cut the act and tell us what you really heard," Jackalstar snarled, marching up to the black tom. He smirked as he watched her anger unfold on him.

Batchaser then shrugged, flicking his tail. "I just heard a little bit.

You know, your mousedung on how the Clans will be affected by this, blah blah blah, I didn't really care to listen to the rest."

"You can't tell anyone," Jackalstar ordered. "It's too dangerous."

"Who are you to decide who's worthy enough to know?" the black tom challenged, flicking his tail.

"Don't act like you deserve to know the fate of the Clans," Jackalstar spat, eyes blazing. "You've never helped out here in any way. You're lazy and selfish. You're completely useless here!"

Batchaser rolled his eyes, not at all being affected by the white she-cat's insults. "Not just me, idiot. Every StarClan cat. They should get to know what might happen to their past Clans. After all, they want their former Clanmates to thrive, correct?"

She shook her head briskly. "No. We can't tell them. There would be chaos and no order. StarClan would fall."

"You don't know that will happen!" The blue-eyed tom's claws sunk into the ground. "The others might actually want to help. There might *be* no chaos."

"I'm not risking it. Go home, Batchaser." Her voice was stern and her teeth were clenched.

Anger burned inside the tom. "I'm not leaving. Thanks though, Your Majesty."

Jackalstar unsheathed her claws. Galewhisker leapt in front of her, narrowing his green eyes. "Jackalstar, no. Just let him go. He's right; you aren't the leader of StarClan."

She looked furious and shoved the gray tom aside. "We'll talk later," she spat, whipping her head back to Batchaser. "Fine. You can go. Just don't get in our way."

"Might as well travel with you guys since we're going to the same place." A smirk formed on the black tom's jaws and Jackalstar looked ready to kill. Galewhisker's careful gaze shifted between the two, seeming as if he were ready to stop any fight that might form

between them.

Jackalstar didn't reply and stalked away from him, Galewhisker glancing at Batchaser as he ran after her. The black tom turned and trudged up the slope, staying a few foxlengths behind them.

That was interesting, Batchaser thought, lifting his eyes to the dark, starry sky. *However... I feel like they didn't tell me everything. They know something I don't. And I need to figure out what it is.*

A/N: Hey! I got another chapter out fairly quickly, and I'm actually pretty proud of this one ;3; Jackalstar is definitely going to play an important role in this story, and maybe even Galewhisker ... I suppose you'll find out soon enough :)

Anyway, if you could tell me how you feel about these three characters that would be great! Please vote and comment your thoughts, and may StarClan light your path ✧

Chapter 4 || The Star-filled Pool

It felt like the three cats had been walking for moons. Batchaser ducked his head and let out a sigh, trudging up the slope. He noticed that the grass began to disappear, being replace by cold, hard stone. Flicking his ears back, he ran up the hill, bolting past Jackalstar and Galewhisker.

"He's an idiot," Batchaser heard Jackalstar growl, her piercing blue-amber eyes not leaving him. The black tom ignored her and looked down into a pool full of glittering water.

His paws wouldn't move. The tom had never seen something so beautiful. The reflection of the stars shone in the water, causing the tom to look up into the navy sky.

"Hurry it up, you've already wasted enough of our time!" Jackalstar spat, lashing her tail. Batchaser gave her an exasperated look and leaped down. He noticed the pawprints of his ancient ancestors, his paws nearly fitting into the shapes.

"What do I do?" Batchaser inquired, looking past the white she-cat and directly at Galewhisker.

Jackalstar let out a wheezing laugh. The gray tom's whiskers twitched in amusement and he looked down at the pool. "Touch your nose to it. It's quite easy."

Jackalstar shoved Batchaser out of the way and bent down, her nose touching the water. Galewhisker flicked his tail, crouching down beside the snappy she-cat and doing the same.

The black tom curled his tail. This was it. He was really going to do this. Closing his eyes, Batchaser touched his soft pink nose to the glittering pool of light, gasping as darkness covered his gaze.

When he blinked open his eyes, he was in a large clearing; The Gathering Place, to be exact. His blue eyes sparkled with excitement, his claws flexing with anticipation.

"So, what are you doing here?" Jackalstar asked, jerking Batchaser out of his thoughts. The black tom turned to face her, shrugging.

"I just wanted to check this place out. It's pretty awesome, you know?" he responded coolly.

The she-cat narrowed her eyes. "Yeah, I know. And you'd know too, if you gave omens and prophecies to your Clan."

Batchaser rolled his eyes. "Curse my old Clan. They'd never give a rat's tail for me. I guess I didn't get along with too many cats."

"Yeah, I know their pain..." Jackalstar muttered. "Anyway, just choose what Clan you want to go to, and what cat's dream you want to visit."

The black tom cocked a brow. "Yeah? And how do I do that...?"

"Just look down."

"Look down? Why--" When the tom's eyes flickered down to the ground, he let out a startled gasp and his heart nearly fell out of his chest. Below him were the Clans' territories, looking like ant's homes from up here. A wide grin spread across Batchaser's jaws, excitement flaring through his whole body.

Jackalstar flicked her ear and muttered something, her frame beginning to fade. The blue-eyed tom watched as the white-and-brown she-cat disappeared, a dull light floating down toward WindClan's territory. Was that *her*? Batchaser shook his head, looking around for Galewhisker. He'd come too, hadn't he?

I guess he left before I even arrived. Didn't really care much for conversation with me. Eh. Can't blame him, I guess. The black tom turned his attention toward ThunderClan's territory, intrigued that he could see their camp like he was a cloud. Could his Clanmates see *him*? Was he a bright shining star in the sky right now?

Batchaser narrowed his eyes. Jackalstar had told him to choose a Clan, but how did he get there? "This probably won't work, but... ThunderClan?" The black tom shook his head, but let out a gasp as he slowly began to drift from the sky toward their territory. His eyes widened and he let out a gleeful yowl, but it only echoed in his ears. He wondered if he looked like the light he'd seen when Jackalstar had gone to WindClan. Possibly.

The black tom eventually reached the camp, seeming to return to his cat form. He pricked his ears in interest at the layers of rock that surrounded him. He'd never actually been in or seen ThunderClan's camp. It was interesting. Batchaser picked out the closest den to what seemed to be the leader's, sticking his head in and flicking his skinny tail.

He noticed many large cats sleeping, proud of himself for being able to guess the warriors' den so quickly. He narrowed his eyes, trying to find a familiar pale brown pelt. The black tom eventually found Paleheart's nest, staring down at this horrible, cold-hearted tom. The tom that had killed him. Had ruined his life. All Batchaser wanted to do was slash his claws across his throat, but he couldn't kill him in his sleep.

Shaking his head, Batchaser tentatively placed his paw on Paleheart, gasping as darkness again surrounded his vision. His eyes snapped open, fur prickling in annoyance when he heard the ThunderClan warrior's shrill call. "Hello? Is anyone here? Hello?"

Rolling his blue eyes, Batchaser stepped out of the darkness, trying to appear as ominous as possible. Paleheart gasped, his eyes landing on the ShadowClan warrior he had killed.

Immediately, the pale brown tom fell to the ground, beginning to let out heavy sobs. "I'm sorry, Batchaser! I didn't mean it! I was being so stupid! I didn't want to kill you! But I did! And I feel horrible! You have no idea!! Please, oh, please forgive me!"

Batchaser stared at the tom, looking back up and shaking his head. Did this idiotic ThunderClanner really expect him to give him forgiveness? Whatever. This wasn't what he was here to do.

"I'm here for something else, actually," Batchaser meowed, narrowing his eyes as he stared down at Paleheart. The brown tom stood to his paws, eyes wide as moons. "I'm here to give you a prophecy."

"M--Me?" Paleheart choked out. "But... but I killed you! I don't deserve to receive a prophecy!"

Yes, you! Do you see anyone else here?

Batchaser pushed away his irritation and nodded. "Yes. Listen closely, Paleheart, and don't forget it." He paused, hoping to add suspense. "*The delicate feather will be caught in the flames of fury, and the thunderous clouds will fall under past mistakes*."

Paleheart's eyes widened. Batchaser had a hard time forcing himself not to smirk. *His mate, Featherpelt, is sure to be the first to come to mind. Gingerflame, his deputy, will come next. The thundering clouds obviously means ThunderClan, and past mistakes means Paleheart's slip-up for killing me.*

Of course, it was rat crap. None of that was real, and it's not like it was going to come true. But Paleheart didn't know that. He'd probably make the error of telling his Clan the prophecy, and get paranoid for his mate's safety. *Then, if Doestar finds out that Paleheart killed a ShadowClan warrior, he's sure to make a connection between he and Gingerflame, since their deputy is the only cat in the Clan with a fire-related name. At least, I'm guessing that's what will happen. I hope. I'll ruin Paleheart's perfect little life, and he'll forever regret murdering me in cold blood.*

"What does it mean??" Paleheart asked. "I need to know!"

Batchaser was quiet, staring at the pale brown tom and beginning to disappear on purpose. The brown tom let out a screech of fear, demanding the former ShadowClan warrior to tell him what the prophecy meant, but he didn't.

And as Batchaser faded from the ThunderClanner's dream, he left Paleheart in a state of paranoia, stress, and anxiety.

A/N: Hey everyone! Sorry for such a late update! One whole month... ugh... Let's consider it a late Christmas gift, right before New Years! I hope all of you got amazing presents, and have an awesome new year! 2017 is finally here.

I hope you guys enjoyed the chapter; it's a little longer this time! It was really fun to write, and I look forward to continuing Batchaser's story!

So, please vote and comment your thoughts, and may StarClan light your path

Chapter 5 || Placed Blame

Batchaser was lying in a makeshift nest under the towering oak trees, his nose twitching as a leaf fell on top of it. He blinked his blue eyes open and batted the green leaf off, groaning as he picked himself to his paws.

The tom straightened his back as he pulled himself into a sitting position, laying his thin tail around his black paws. Batchaser flicked an ear and examined his surroundings; the tree he was lying under was massive, much larger than any other trees in this forest. It's branches wove together like snakes, intertwining to make following the branches even more confusing, with tendrils hanging from the sides.

It vaguely reminded him of a tree he used to sit under back in ShadowClan's territory, in the living world. Back when he was *alive*. Batchaser's claws flexed as he remembered how it felt to live; he missed ShadowClan's dark territory, he missed the different types of weather, he missed gaining scars and wounds. If only he could return.

Batchaser had never had these thoughts before. It was always fine for him to be dead; that hadn't ever bothered him. But now? Batchaser felt lonelier than ever.

"WELL IF YOU'D KEEP YOUR CLAN OUT OF EVERYONE'S BUSINESS, MAYBE THIS WOULDN'T BE THE CASE!"

Batchaser was jerked back into reality as the shriek of a tom rang throughout the forest. His ears pricked and he lifted himself to his paws, following the distant sound of arguing voices.

When the black tom stopped by the bushes, he shrunk low to the ground, flicking his ears back as he peered through the foliage. He caught sight of a white tom adorned with black stripes, his green eyes sharper than jagged ice. Batchaser followed the white tom's gaze and immediately recognized Jackalstar.

"Oh, shut your jaws, Shellstar. You're just placing the blame on ThunderClan, because apparently *trying to help others means we're the cause of all problems*!"

Shellstar curled his lip, beginning to circle Jackalstar, who stood her ground with defiant amber-yellow eyes.

"Like I said, it's not our fault," Jackalstar continued when there was a moment of silence between the two leaders. "And I'm not blaming ShadowClan, either. I'm not blaming *any* Clan. This was a cat -- one only. One that wanted to bring destruction to the lake."

The large white tom's muscles rippled under his pelt as he stopped dead in his tracks. "Are you insisting what I think you are?"

A look of worry came across Jackalstar's face. "Yes. I think... I think The Dark Forest has a spy here. A rat. Someone we all trust. A snake in the grass. A--"

"I get it," Shellstar grumbled, holding up his bushy black tail for her to quiet. His green eyes flashed with something Batchaser couldn't quite place, but it disappeared before he could figure it out. What was that? Fear? Guilt? Anger? Denial?

Jackalstar swished her tail, furrowing her brows. "I think I might have some idea of who the rat is."

Batchaser's blood went cold. Without another thought, the black tom turned tail and sprinted through the bushes. *They know about you. They know about the fake prophecy. You* idiot*!*

Fear crept its way up his whole body as he aimlessly ran through the forest. He didn't know where he was going, but it didn't matter at this point. He was exposed. His stupid prophecy would only cause his death.

Then he heard it. Thrumming paws behind him. Terror caused his legs to move faster, and the tom yowled in pain when his paw was caught on the root of a tree sticking out of the ground. Batchaser tumbled over the terrain and smashed into the side of a tree, groaning in pain. However, his wounds immediately

disappeared, and he regained his strength.

"Batchaser!" A furious hiss sounded above the tom and as he blinked open his green eyes, he made out the form of Jackalstar, the sun outlining her sides, shafting light onto the tree.

The black tom said nothing. Jackalstar unsheathed her claws, eyes burning with newfound anger. "I'm disappointed in you. Really. After our little trip I had the crazy notion that *maybe* you weren't as bad as you make yourself out to be, but clearly I was wrong!"

Batchaser recoiled, his heart nearly pumping out of his chest. He didn't respond; he only tried to keep himself calm.

The white she-cat's claws suddenly sheathed again and she shook her head. "Just stop eavesdropping, will you?"

"Jackalstar..!" Batchaser recognized the voice of Shellstar, who was just now appearing from the bushes, panting heavily, looking like he was going to keel over. "Did.. y.. ou... find... the cat...?"

The brown-patched she-cat nodded, ripping her gaze from Batchaser and examining the other former leader. "StarClan Shellstar, keep up, will you? You run as fast as a two-moon-old kit."

Shellstar didn't respond, only stood there for a few more silent moments until he gasped in the StarClan air. He padded forward slowly, his green eyes landing on Batchaser. "Who're you?" he asked, tail-tip flicking back and forth as he spoke. Jackalstar turned back to stare at the former ShadowClan warrior.

The black tom drew in a breath and staggered to his paws shakily, looking between the two. *So... they don't know of what I've done? She's only angry because I was listening to their argument?*

"His name is Batchaser," Jackalstar mewed. "And he's apparently mute."

"Really?" Shellstar inquired, tipping his head to the side. Jackalstar rolled her eyes and Batchaser shot the she-cat a glare.

"No, I'm not *mute*," he snapped, facing the black-striped tom.

"Why were you eavesdropping then, *Batchase*?" Shellstar asked, his voice somewhat laced with bitterness.

"First of all, it's Batchaser," the black tom growled, his pearly-white claws sinking into the ground. "Second, I could hear you two idiots from a mile away. Are you really all that surprised I decided to come listen?"

Shellstar's ear twitched and he slightly narrowed his eyes at Batchaser's response. "Does he always address Clan leaders this way?" the white tom asked Jackalstar, his claws curling. *He doesn't like to be disrespected.*

"*Former* Clan leaders," Batchaser corrected, holding his head high. "And yes, I'll talk to you however I wish. Especially if you're too much of a coward to announce how you feel about me."

Shellstar curled his lip and Jackalstar stepped in between the two cats, acting as the mediator this time; maybe she was picking up a few skills from Galewhisker. "Stop," she ordered, "this is no time for an argument." The amber-eyed she-cat faced Batchaser. "What did you hear?"

The black tom shrugged, licking his paw and drawing it over his ear. "Stuff."

"How about you tell us a little more than *'stuff'*," Shellstar snarled, all calmness swept away. Batchaser smirked, proud that he'd been able to anger the former leader so quickly.

"You two disrupted my peace with your stupid bickering and I came over to shut you up. Then I heard you throwing the blame at each other, and grew interested. Then you--" he pointed at Jackalstar, "--spoke about how The Dark Forest had a spy in StarClan. That's all I heard, besides your *very loud muttering*," Batchaser growled, staring at Shellstar, who was snarling curse words louder than to just himself.

Jackalstar flicked her tail. "I trust you'll hold this information to

only yourself?"

Batchaser shrugged again. "Who knows? I might go and tell everyone, I might not. Just depends how I feel, really."

"You stupid little--" Shellstar began, leaping to his paws as he snarled insults and made his way toward Batchaser. Jackalstar, however, held the former leader back. She whipped around to glare at the black tom, unsheathing her claws.

"Don't test me, Batchaser," she spat, her voice laced with venom more deadly than an adder's. "If you tell anyone and I find out, I'll kill you. That's a promise."

The black tom acted calm and rolled his eyes, but inside he knew that was true. She had ThunderClan eyes everywhere and pretty much knew every cat. If she wanted him dead, she'd succeed in doing so.

Shellstar was silent as he turned away curtly, motioning for Jackalstar to follow. "We have matters to discuss," he murmured, scowling at Batchaser. "Without any eavesdroppers."

"Indeed we do," the white she-cat agreed, dipping her head. "Batchaser, leave."

Giving Jackalstar a dramatic bow, Batchaser snorted. "As you wish, *your Majesty*."

The she-cat rolled her eyes and said nothing, watching as the black tom turned and padded away.

But as he left the two former leaders, Batchaser's smirk turned into a frown. They knew about the prophecy, and probably only had to ask Paleheart who'd delivered it. Then he'd be exposed.

His thoughts sent Batchaser spiraling into a world of terror; if they found out -- no, *when* -- they found out about what he'd done, what would happen to him? He guessed Jackalstar would kill him herself, but wondered if that was even possible. StarClan cats could gain wounds, but they'd disappear in a matter of seconds. So how would she take his life if he was already dead? And if it was

possible, where would Batchaser go next? Would he never wake up again, or would he be sent to another place?

Shaking his head, Batchaser decided to clear his thoughts by hunting. He spotted a flash of gray fur on the ground and crouched down low, stalking forward. He narrowed his blue eyes and leapt, landing squarely on top of the mouse.

Batchaser grabbed the small creature in his jaws and traveled back to the large oak tree, feeling at peace again. He set the mouse down and tore a morsel off, gulping it down quickly. His eyes drifted from his catch and set on the red flowers swaying above his head, attached to the branches of the tree.

It was beautiful, to say the least. Batchaser rolled onto his back and abandoned the prey, staring at the cloudless sky and the leaves that drifted from the tree.

If I'm going to be killed, then I should enjoy StarClan while I can. But what much left is there to relish?

A/N: Hey everyone! Sorry this chapter is so late – I haven't updated in like a month. My apologies, but writer's block is a living hell for authors.

Anyway, I hope you enjoyed the chapter! I sure loved writing it. I love Jackalstar so much ahh

You should also tell me who your favorite character is! I'm very interested in knowing! :)

Lastly, please vote and comment your thoughts, and may StarClan light your path

Chapter 6 || New StarClanner

Batchaser was bored. His head was rested on his paws, his blue eyes flitting to the movements of prey and animals in the forest. He sighed, flicking his thin tail back and forth.

Nothing had happened the past few days. No news about his fake prophecy or anything about destruction in ThunderClan. He flexed his claws, wishing he could see what was going on down there. Or wishing that he could squeeze the life out of Paleheart. Either one, really.

Lifting himself to his paws, Batchaser decided to take a walk. He outstretched his legs and yawned, eyes cracking shut. He let the sun soak into his black pelt and strode out of his usual clearing.

Maybe he'd come across Jackalstar today, or Galewhisker or Shellstar. Part of him really wanted to see Jackalstar, and another didn't.

StarClan, what is wrong with you? There's no way you want to see that idiot. All she does is snap at you.

But again, he sort of... liked that. Fire meeting his fire was something he'd never come across. Lynxbite definitely hadn't been like that. No, she had been... *cruel*. There was no fire. Just *evil*.

Pushing his thoughts to the back of his mind, Batchaser pricked his ears to try and pick up any conversation. Nothing. It was like everyone had moved out of the forest. *Or Jackalstar learned to keep her confrontations elsewhere.*

Thinking, the black tom wondered where he could visit. *Hmm. Maybe the Welcoming Grounds?*

The Welcoming Grounds were where new StarClan members arrived. They were greeted by their relatives or close friends, who would get called to come down when said cat died and escort them

into the territory. Batchaser remembered being there. He also remembered having to guide himself into the meadows, since no one had come to welcome him.

Oh well.

The former ShadowClanner walked a little while longer, hoping to soon arrive at his destination. The forest had begun to clear out, opening to hills and meadows with trees dotting the area. White clouds drifted overhead, blue sky surrounding them as usual.

The weather never changes around here, does it? Pretty boring if you ask me.

Batchaser shrugged to himself and continued on, staring at his paws as he walked. He began to wonder if he should turn back, but a bright light distracted him. The black tom jerked his head up and watched in awe as a dazzling white beam stretched up through the clouds. Batchaser moved his paws forward and headed toward the light, wondering if that meant a cat was here.

He made it toward a rise in the ground and noticed a small kit on the top. Batchaser twitched an ear, looking around. Was no one coming to welcome this kit? And how had they died?

"Hey! K--" The former warrior cut himself short when he noticed the lithe shape of Jackalstar making her way up on the other side.

He watched with sharp blue eyes for a few moments longer before deciding he should return back. He was exhausted, and it felt as if his legs were going to collapse under him. "Well, guess that's sorted out," he muttered to himself as Jackalstar bent down to speak to the kitten.

Before he turned around, the former leader spotted him and looked as if she huffed in exasperation. Batchaser inwardly snickered and whipped around, padding away from the rise.

"Hey!" the brown-and-white she-cat called out, running after him. The black tom stopped and looked at her inquisitively. "Look, I

need you here. Just help me escort this apprentice to the Gathering Grounds. He doesn't have anyone else here for him. Luckily I was passing by."

Batchaser flicked an ear and looked up at the "apprentice", who met his gaze. *I remember that being me. I mean, I wasn't a kit, but I know what it felt like*.

Then he stopped himself. *But I can't get attached. Just say no*.

"Sorry," he responded. "Can't do it. I've gotta return home."

Jackalstar stared back at him. "Please?"

Batchaser was quiet, huffing silently. "That's an apprentice?"

The former ThunderClan leader nodded and turned tail, beckoning for him to follow. "Come on. Greet him."

He ducked his head and walked after the she-cat, making it to the top where the k--apprentice was. Seriously, this cat was too small to be an apprentice. *Runt, maybe*.

Batchaser held his breath and looked down at him. He was a blue-gray tom with vibrant copper eyes flicked with green. "H-Hello." The black tom nearly punched himself for stuttering. "I'm Batchaser. This is Jackalstar." He nodded to the former leader. "Who are you?"

The apprentice bounced on his paws, eyes shining with excitement. "I'm Rushing...paw! I came from RiverClan."

Figures. Sleek fur, lithe frame.

"Why'd you die so early on?" Batchaser asked. Jackalstar shot him a glare. *Whoops*.

Rushingpaw looked crestfallen for a few seconds before lifting his head. "I... I don't know." A pang hit the black tom's heart. Such a young age to die. He couldn't imagine losing a son. Then again, he wouldn't have a son; he was terrible at being any kind of father. He was hot-tempered and had no filter.

"It's okay," Jackalstar purred. "But now you're here, with us... welcome to StarClan, Rushingpaw."

A/N: It's been two months, whoops. Anyway, you've now been introduced to a new character! Little Rushingpaw (who is from *A Warrior's Life: Bushtail and Whisperflight*)! I know he hasn't said much, but I already love him haha.

So, there's chapter 6! Chapter 7 will be Batchaser and Jackalstar escorting Rushingpaw to the Gathering Grounds, and he'll be learning some news about his fake prophecy and what's been going on down in the Clans.

Stay tuned! I'm gonna try and update before two months!

Please vote and comment, and may StarClan light your path✧

Chapter 7 || The Clans Below

Annoyed. That was the only word that described Batchaser at the moment. Rushingpaw couldn't shut off his rambling, and Jackalstar was trying to make conversation with the black tom. *Just because I helped doesn't mean I want to talk*.

Flexing his claws, Batchaser saw the rolling hills coming up. They'd be arriving at the Gatherings Grounds soon -- thank StarClan. He wasn't sure how much more of this apprentice he could take.

"Batchaser."

Honestly, all the tom could think about was returning to the forest and being alone. Yes, he grew lonely sometimes, but that was the only place he could really "recharge" his energy, if that made any sense at all. Talking was just so tiring.

"Batchaser!"

The former warrior snapped his head to Jackalstar, irritation clear in his blue eyes. "What?" he snapped.

The white-and-brown she-cat narrowed her eyes. "Rushingpaw was just asking you a question. Are you deaf *and* mute?"

"No." Batchaser grumbled something under his breath and craned his muzzle down to look at the apprentice.

"What Clan were you a part of?" he inquired.

"ShadowClan."

"Oh, cool!! I was in RiverClan."

"I know."

"Who was your leader? Mine was Applestar."

"Fallenstar."

"Why are *you* dead?"

Batchaser froze. He glared at the blue-gray tom and lashed his tail back and forth a few times. "I don't know. Does anyone know?" Jackalstar snorted and the black tom flexed his claws. "Probably some stupid ThunderClanner." *Not probably. It* was*. But I can't admit that I know yet.*

Rushingpaw shrugged. "Yeah, ThunderClan was okay I guess. I didn't know them, though. What were they like? I didn't know... uh... ShadowClan, either."

"Jackalstar?" Batchaser addressed, looking up at the former leader. "Maybe you should answer Rushingpaw's very important questions. After all, you're from ThunderClan."

The apprentice gasped. "Really? I didn't know that! I guessed you were both ShadowClan."

"Oh come on, I'm not some frog-eating donkey," the she-cat said all-too-highly, raising her head and puffing out her chest. "I'm from the best Clan around the lake."

Batchaser gave her an exaggerated shocked expression. "*What* did you call me? *A frog-eating donkey*? *Oh*! How *dare* you!"

Jackalstar snickered. "Mm. You are. And RiverClan has a bunch of slimy fish-eaters. Gross."

"They aren't gross!" Rushingpaw protested. "They're delicious! You're just jealous you can't swim!"

Batchaser chuckled. He listened to the two argue back and forth until they padded up another rise. The apprentice's words drifted off as he took in the sight of rolling hills, rivers, forests, and cats. They'd officially made it back to the Gathering Grounds.

"Wow." The small gray tom took in a breath and darted off toward the river, yelling, "Thanks for the trip!" to Batchaser and Jackalstar. The two older cats exchanged a glance before walking

after him.

The black tom stopped in his tracks when he heard yelling. He vaguely made out Jackalstar's name. Batchaser turned to the she-cat and cocked a brow. She opened her jaws to question what he was doing but too heard the screaming.

"Oh." The white she-cat flicked her tail. "That's Shellstar. Go watch Rushingpaw, will you?" Jackalstar turned and trotted off, the former ShadowClanner watching her with narrowed blue eyes.

"Hmm." Batchaser twisted his head around to flash a glance toward the apprentice, then sprinted off after the former leader. He was going to find out what was going on. After all, it could have something to do with his fake prophecy to Paleheart.

His paws tore up grass as he ran into another forest similar to the one he usually stayed in. He followed Jackalstar's scent, gasping in surprise when he ran right into her. She hissed and wheeled around, glaring daggers at him. "StarClan! I knew you'd follow me. What do you want?"

"I want to know what's going on!" he bit back. Jackalstar curled her lips into a snarl. "Look, you might as well let me come along and hear. I know all about your trips to the Clans and your secret meetings with friends. Besides, I'll spy on you if you don't let me."

The she-cat didn't respond for a few more seconds. Finally, she let out a forced sigh. "Fine. Follow me."

Batchaser smirked, padding after Jackalstar. He felt particularly proud of himself for being able to convince her so easily. Maybe he was improving.

"JACKALSTAR!"

"*I'M COMING*!" the she-cat yowled back, rolling her eyes. "He's so impatient. He should just come to me next time."

They emerged into a clearing, trees surrounding the two cats. Batchaser noticed Shellstar's white pelt hidden away in the bushes, black stripes hardly visible.

"You can come out now," Jackalstar said.

"Ugh. *He's* here?" Shellstar continued to speak as he padded out of the foliage. He eyed Batchaser suspiciously before turning to the former ThunderClanner.

"So? What's up?" The black tom sat down and licked his paw, drawing it over his ear to show he was comfortable.

"I don't think he should be here," the other former leader growled.

"Well, he's not leaving and he knows enough, so we might as well just say it in front of him," Jackalstar snapped back. "Now, I'm tired of waiting! What's going on?"

Batchaser mused. *She's sure a hypocrite, isn't she?*

"Ugh." Shellstar lashed his tail. "Okay. Just... our problem is--"

"What's our problem?" Batchaser cut in. The white tom snarled.

"We had a fake prophecy sent to a living cat. I think you know that already." The black tom forced himself not to tense up. *Oh, no.* "And now the Clans are in an all-out war; ThunderClan has been caught in the middle of it. Everyone is blaming them and now it's ShadowClan, WindClan and RiverClan against them. They've already been driven out of the territory."

"This is insane!" Jackalstar hissed, her eyes blazing. "Someone needs to go down there and knock some sense into them! Why hasn't this happened? Clearly they aren't thinking straight and need some guidance!"

The white tom was quiet. "That's actually why.. I called you here. Jackalstar, we have no way to speak to the Clans. The Star-filled Pool has been shut off."

A/N: Woahh an update?? It's only been 5 days?? How is this possible?? This is a very rare Paint sighting.

Anyway, I enjoyed writing this! It wasn't great—I'm aware—

but I'm excited to get this plot moving forward! I also felt I had no other way to rewrite this chapter, so I kept it how it was.

So, what did you think? Who's your favorite character so far?

Next time, we have an uproar in StarClan that creates even more destruction. Batchaser also becomes a little rebellious and this causes tension between Jackalstar, Shellstar and himself. Stay tuned!

Please vote and comment your thoughts, and may StarClan light your path✨

Chapter 8 || Storm Clouds

Batchaser could tell something was wrong from the minute he awoke. Dark clouds rolled into the sky, lightning flashing between the cracks, no light filtering through to StarClan. The usual soft breeze turned into a hard, blowing wind, taking the leaves off of trees. The rivers were crashing with waves, the grass in the meadows swirling like a hurricane.

Chaos.

The black tom had never seen StarClan like this; every day was full of sunshine and calmness, happy rainbows and such. But today was different. Batchaser knew that something was going to happen, and he was growing quite anxious about it.

His heart pounded in his chest as he staggered to his paws. The tom made his way toward the Gathering Grounds, blue eyes flickering from side to side to spot any other cats. It seemed to just be him.

Any blue sky left was covered. Batchaser felt as if he were in the Dark Forest; maybe he was. Maybe his dreams of StarClan were all in his mind. But he knew better than that. This was real. This was happening. *They must know. Everyone knows what you did...*

When he exited the tree line and scanned the terrain, his eyes widened at the sight before him. Hundreds of cats were crammed together in the meadow, yowling and bickering echoing off of them. He angled his ears forward, furrowing his brows as he picked his way through the tall grass. *What are they arguing about?*

He eventually made it to the large group, squirming and squeezing through the bodies packed together. Every cat he saw had their lips curled into a sneer, eyes blazing with anger as they glared and snapped at the cats around them. Batchaser wondered if everyone was somehow rubbing off on him. He didn't know StarClan cats to be cruel and angry; he knew them to usually be

collected and mature. But this? This was madness.

The tom, lost in thought, accidentally ran right into a fully white she-cat. She rounded on Batchaser, a hiss making its way out of her jaws. "Hey! Watch where you're going, idiot," she spat.

The former ShadowClanner narrowed his eyes. A hiss wrenched from his throat as his claws dug into the ground below him, tail lashing like an angry adder. "How about you don't order me around?" he snapped back. "Don't act so high and mighty."

"Hah! Like you'd know anything. What are you even doing here?" she snorted. "I thought all you did was doze around in the forest."

"I don't!" he growled, baring his teeth.

"Yeah you do!" she responded mockingly.

Before Batchaser had time to reply, a familiar voice jerked him out of his conversation. "Batchaser! What are you doing here?"

He quickly spotted Jackalstar, who was running toward him, worry evident in the way she moved. Annoyance sparked in his blue eyes. "Why is everyone asking me that?"

She shook her head. "Follow me." Batchaser flashed a cheeky grin at the white she-cat and quickly followed his friend. Friend? Friend.

"Sooo, what's going on?" the black tom asked as they made their way from the swarm of StarClanners, heading toward another familiar white cat - Shellstar.

"We'll explain when we get over here.." she murmured, ears flicking back.

"Hey!!! Wait!! Batchaser! Jackalstar!"

The two snapped their heads to the side in unison, watching as a small gray tom stumbled over to them. His copper eyes held excitement and interest, but also a hint of worry.

Rushingpaw.

"What do you want?" Batchaser snapped, the words immediately tumbling out of his mouth. Jackalstar shoved the black tom away and stared down at the apprentice, cocking a brow.

"Uh, I, I, I wanted to know what's going on!" he responded, slightly ducking his head. "I-I mean, you were the ones that introduced me to StarClan... I.... figured you could tell me..!"

"It's none of your business, kit," Batchaser grumbled.

"I'm... not a kit, just small," Rushingpaw countered quietly.

Jackalstar exchanged a glance with the former warrior and sighed heavily. "Fine. I suppose you'll know soon, anyway."

The gray tom perked up and smiled widely. "Yay!! Thank you so much! Thank you!" Batchaser rolled his eyes and muttered something inaudible as he turned and headed toward Shellstar.

The large white tom was eyeing the three suspiciously. "Jackalstar, why do you always bring Batchase? And what is a kit doing here?"

"It's Batchaser," the she-cat replied, "and he's not a kit. Rushingpaw is an apprentice."

"*Apprentice*?" Shellstar burst out into laughter. "Wow, that's funny... you a runt, then?"

The small gray tom narrowed his eyes and said nothing. Batchaser growled lowly. "Leave him alone, will you? What are we doing here? What's going on with StarClan?"

"That's exactly--"

"Hey! I've been looking for you... oh." Another voice caused Batchaser to jerk his head back, eyes landing on a gray tom with black splotches. It was Galewhisker.

"Galewhisker?" Jackalstar inquired, tilting her head to the side.

"What are you doing here?"

"I know what's going on. I didn't assist you just to deliver a failed omen; I'm here to help. Fill me in," the green-eyed tom said, his tail flicking from side to side. He observed the cats around him, noticing Rushingpaw.

"Oh.. an apprentice." Rushingpaw smiled. "And.... Shellstar. I see. Is this your new group, Jackalstar?"

Everyone was quiet. Batchaser felt confusion as he looked toward the former leader. *New group? What does that mean?*

The she-cat seemed to crumble. "Galewhisker..."

The gray-and-black tom's eyes widened. "You haven't told them?!"

"I... no! I didn't want to yet! I wanted them to trust me!" she responded in a small wail.

The wise tom shook his head and took a step back. "Tell them, then." Jackalstar was quiet. "Or I will."

Rushingpaw's ears perked, Batchaser's claws unsheathing. No emotion crossed Shellstar's face.

The white she-cat turned to the group, head drooping. "I gathered you all because... well, because I wanted to secretly reincarnate all of you."

Rushingpaw gasped. Batchaser's eyes lit up in anger, searing anger ripping through his whole body. She wanted to *secretly reincarnate* him? Shellstar looked quite surprised, but only betrayed an ear flick as he carefully watched the former ThunderClanner.

"I found a way to do it. When the Star-lit Pool is closed, it... it opens into a portal. Anyone that goes through will be reincarnated into one of the four original Clans. I needed four of you to do it. Batchaser, Rushingpaw, Shellstar, and Galewhisker.." Jackalstar said.

The black tom could hardly believe he was hearing this. "And how did you think you'd be able to do it?" he hissed. "I wouldn't just jump into a portal to return to the Clans. I *like* it up here."

"I was going to tell you that you needed to visit a cat's dream... that you would be able to save the Clans by doing it." He flexed his claws. "You'd think you'd be a hero... then you would jump in and be reincarnated."

"I don't care about being a hero!" Batchaser spat angrily. "I trusted you! But now, hearing this? I can't believe you'd ever even *think* of doing that to us!"

"I mean... I'd go if I could be leader again," Shellstar calmly spoke.

"Can I go back to RiverClan??" Rushingpaw asked excitedly.

"No!" Batchaser yowled. "We can't go back down! If the Clans are destroyed, well, then it's their fault!" His heart race sped up. "We can't go! I won't!"

"You must," Galewhisker said softly.

"*No*!"

"It's not your choice," Jackalstar responded, narrowing her eyes. "You're going."

"You can't just force me to be reincarnated! I'm not going back down! You can't make me!" Batchaser fluffed up his fur and backed away, baring his teeth at anyone that got close to him.

"It's not up to you," Jackalstar growled. "StarClan has demanded it. I'm sorry, Batchaser; your time in the sky is no more. You will be returning to the lake, whether you like it or not."

A/N: Yooooo a new update! I started writing this chapter last night and just finished,, I think it's alright. I improvised for about 98% of it so that's probably another reason I never complete any of my stories.

Anyway, I hope you enjoyed! Maybe tell me who your favorite/ least favorite character is in the comments? And tell me what you think about Jackalstar's plan to reincarnate Batchaser and the others down to the Clans?

Anyway, please vote and comment your thoughts, and may StarClan light your path!🌠

Chapter 9 || Confession Time

Batchaser couldn't believe he was hearing this. Jackalstar, trying to order him to be reincarnated into the four original Clans? It was madness! He would never do it!

A part of the black tom's heart began to crumble. He'd finally, *finally* made himself trust someone; he truly thought he'd be able to be friends with Jackalstar. But now, from what she was saying? She had completely betrayed him.

"Why can't you go?" the she-cat growled, lips curling into a snarl. "You'll save the Clans! You'll be back in the real world! Isn't that what you want?"

Yes. Yes, I want to go back so badly! But... I can't. I can't face Paleheart. What if I'm reincarnated back into ThunderClan? Surely he'll know it's me!

He was quiet.

"Look, Jackalstar, I'll go," Shellstar sighed.

"And I will too!" Rushingpaw piped up.

"You know I will, Jackalstar," Galewhisker murmured, dipping his head to the former leader.

All eyes turned to Batchaser. The tom's claws scored into the ground, his tail lashing back and forth. How could they do this to him?

"I-I can't," the former ShadowClanner whispered, voice cracking.

"Why?" Jackalstar asked.

You have to tell them. You must... it's the only way they'll understand.

"Look..." The black tom screwed his eyes shut. "I don't know how to tell you this, okay? I did something bad! Really bad!"

Jackalstar's hackles rose. Shellstar eyed the tom suspiciously. "What did you do, Batchaser?"

For once, he didn't know if he could say it. He didn't want to tell the truth. All Batchaser wanted was for all of this to go away.

Finally, however, the black tom opened his eyes. He scanned over the four other cats, feeling like his legs might crumple underneath him. "I-I did it," he whispered.

Galewhisker twitched an ear. "Did what?"

"I.." Batchaser gulped. "I-I sent a fake prophecy.."

The others were silent. His heart thrummed in his chest, blood roaring in his ears. It was like the world stopped–all except for him.

"You... you *what*?" Jackalstar spat, her eyes blazing. Her claws unsheathed, her tail lashing back and forth like an angry snake ready to strike its prey.

Rushingpaw looked between the former leader and warrior with confusion. "A fake prophecy?" he echoed, tipping his head to the side. "I don't remember any fake prophecy..."

Galewhisker didn't look at the black tom. Shellstar, however, looked... well, *pissed*. That was still an understatement, though.

"Why don't you explain a little more?" Jackalstar growled, taking a few steps toward Batchaser. "We're all so eager to hear how you've destroyed the world you left behind."

Batchaser gulped. His ears flicked back, flat on his head. He was ashamed; so, so very ashamed of what he'd done. But... how was it his fault, really? A sudden anger flared through his body and he met Jackalstar's defiant gaze.

"I remembered who killed me," he snarled.

Shellstar narrowed his eyes. "That's impossible. No one remembers how they died. I'm sure you weren't even killed--"

"I *was*," Batchaser cut in. "I remember it so vividly. There was a battle between ShadowClan and ThunderClan. Paleheart killed me."

Jackalstar was quiet.

"Paleheart was..." Galewhisker trailed off, eyes slightly widening. "So... you're the one who... who..."

"I'd know if you told me!" he growled.

Jackalstar lifted her head higher. "Paleheart killed his own Clan's deputy, and took several lives out of his leader. He delivered the prophecy you gave him before Doestar killed him." There was a pause, as if the she-cat couldn't bear to tell the rest of the story.

"Then ThunderClan decided to share the prophecy at the next gathering," Galewhisker began, eyeing Jackalstar. "They thought that if they told the others what was going on, they wouldn't be as... despised. However, it didn't work. The bordering Clans began to attack ThunderClan and declared war on them. Eventually, RiverClan joined in."

Rushingpaw gasped. "RiverClan?"

Galewhisker flicked an ear. "Yes. So, WindClan, ShadowClan, and RiverClan all drove ThunderClan out of their territory. They've been fighting for land and prey since. It's *chaos* down there."

Shellstar suddenly shouldered his way forward, betraying no emotion. However, his voice showed it all. "*You're* the reason the Clans are in a war. *You're* the reason that the Clans will be destroyed! You've murdered kits! Apprentices! Warriors that only wanted to fight for a cause!" He stuck his muzzle in Batchaser's face. "*You ruined everything*!"

Suddenly, the larger white tom sunk his teeth into the former ShadowClanners scruff and began to drag him toward the huge group of cats. Batchaser scrabbled at the ground and tried to fight his way off, but Shellstar was much stronger. Rushingpaw and

Galewhisker watched with wide eyes. Jackalstar slowly followed, her head dangling.

Shellstar pushed his way through the crowd of StarClanners, earning many angry hisses until they realized what was going on. They watched in curiosity and interest; Batchaser couldn't blame them. However, he didn't want to be the center of attention.

He didn't know what Shellstar was going to do. Humiliate him? Maybe. Fight him? Most likely. *Kill* him?

Batchaser didn't want to answer that. He didn't know what would happen if he died in StarClan; would he be forgotten, a mist in a dark world full of menacing creatures? Or would he just... be gone? Maybe be reincarnated? He honestly didn't know. He didn't *want* to know.

The felines around made a circle, allowing Galewhisker and Jackalstar in. Rushingpaw was shoved to the back, the small tom trying to see what was going on.

"Get back, runt," a menacing-looking tom hissed at Rushingpaw. "You shouldn't even be here." The tiny gray tom narrowed his eyes, attempting to look back through the mass of gathered cats.

In the middle, Shellstar slammed Batchaser to the ground, holding a firm paw on his shoulder. The black tom sent a glare at the former leader, tail flicking back and forth angrily.

Suddenly, Shellstar let him go. Batchaser scrambled to his paws and took a few steps back, watching the white tom's every move. Jackalstar and Galewhisker did the same. Rushingpaw still couldn't see.

"Hello everyone!" Shellstar boomed, whirling around to face every cat. "Today, I've invited a special guest into the circle!" Murmurs rippled around the group.

The circle?

"And, well, I think most of you know what that means." Cats exchanged glances. Shellstar cocked a brow. "No? Well, let me

explain! It simply means that a cat is going to be transported to The Forgotten Eternity!"

Everyone was quiet.

The Forgotten Eternity? He must be making this up. I've never heard such a thing.

"And we all know how cats get to the Forgotten Eternity." Shellstar turned to stare at Batchaser. "Why, let me answer that one. It's easy."

The black tom's fur began to spike up at the words next said.

"All I have to do is kill them."

A/N: Ayeee it's a cliffhanger again. I love cliffhangers so,, that's why there's one.

Lots of stuff is about to happen! Get ready for an epic fight next chapter... Batchaser won't be letting Shellstar kill him in one swipe. This'll be a challenge.

Anyway, please tell me your thoughts on Shellstar and what's going on! I'm excited to hear, haha. Please vote and comment your thoughts, and may StarClan light your path✨

Chapter 10 || Killer Claws

The fur on his back began to spike up when Batchaser realized what Shellstar was saying. A fight to the death—with one of the strongest WindClan leaders of all time.

If I was killed by Paleheart, how can I defeat Shellstar?

"Well, why do you need to fight him?" a cat in the crowd spoke up.

Shellstar looked surprised. "Oh! I forgot to explain! Batchaser here was the one that sent the fake prophecy! *That's* why the Clans are being destroyed!" He let out a loud purr.

Immediately, angry yowls rose up from the group. Cats began to make their way toward Batchaser–most likely to try and kill him–but Shellstar stopped them. "Now, don't be unfair!" The other cats growled but stepped back at the former WindClanner's words, glaring at the black tom. Batchaser didn't move.

"So..." Shellstar met the eyes of every cat standing around him. "Since you all know how great of a fighter I am, we should take a vote. Do I kill him, or... do one of you?" Every feline was quiet. "If you vote for yourself, then you have to make sure to kill him now. If not, he'll be in StarClan, and, well, we don't want that, do we?"

Batchaser snorted. "Wounds in StarClan disappear, idiot."

Shellstar rolled his eyes. "You're the idiot, Batchase. We're standing in the very place it's actually allowed to hurt another cat!"

The black tom twitched an ear as he looked around, noticing the rise in the ground. It did make sense...

"So, fine. Since no one seems to be voting for themselves, it's you against me?" Batchaser inquired, not bothering to correct Shellstar on his name.

The white tom looked around. "So, I'll kill him, then?"

A lump formed in the former ShadowClanner's throat. He would have to fight Shellstar–to the death. Would he really be able to do that? And everyone else was watching...

The group of cats slowly nodded. Galewhisker and Jackalstar stood and watched. Batchaser instantly grew angry. *They're not going to do anything, are they?* His claws slid out, digging into the ground. This was something he would have to face alone.

Shellstar huffed. "Good." He suddenly threw himself toward Batchaser, bowling him over. The black tom was shocked for a few seconds until he managed to realize what was going on, snapping his jaws around Shellstar's shoulder and twisting the older tom off of his body. Shellstar kicked up dust but bounced back on his paws; Batchaser did the same.

Shellstar again leaped for him, but Batchaser was quicker. He rolled out of the way and crashed into the former WindClanner's side, tearing his claws through fur. Shellstar hissed and smashed the black tom in the head with a loose paw, causing Batchaser to fly back from the impact.

The former warrior gritted his teeth and slammed his body upwards when Shellstar tried to gain control of the battle. He knocked the white tom away, swerving around and sinking his teeth into the WindClanner's tail. He hissed, twisting in circles until Batchaser had to let go.

The two toms faced each other, walking in slow circles in the middle of the group of cats. The air was tense; everything and everyone was quiet. It was if all of StarClan was holding their breath, waiting to see what the next move between the two rivals would be.

"Come on, now," Shellstar mocked. "Don't be a coward--"

Before he could even finish his sentence, Batchaser was racing toward the tom. This time, Shellstar faced the black warrior head-on. The two flung on to each other, Shellstar's thorn-sharp claws

digging into his back. The black tom ignored the pain and tried to force the other cat to the ground, but, Shellstar was already two steps ahead of Batchaser.

The black-striped leader pressed his paw down on Batchaser's shoulder, forcing him to the ground. The black tom reared back but Shellstar wrapped his jaws around his neck, a snarl wrenching from his throat. Batchaser yowled in pain and had a flashback of Paleheart; the stupid tom, slicing open his throat and letting the blood flow out.

I won't let that happen again, Batchaser told himself. Determination surged through his body, causing the tom to throw Shellstar off with such force the leader didn't stand for a long time. Batchaser was back on him, teeth enclosed around his throat. Shellstar gasped in pain, blood welling from his wounds.

However, Batchaser didn't crush his throat.

Instead, he narrowed his eyes. "Do you give up?" he snarled through a mouthful of Shellstar's fur. When there was no response, Batchaser bit down harder. "*Do you give up*?" he spat.

"Y-Yes." Shellstar flopped to the ground, wheezing heavily. Jackalstar's eyes widened, Galewhisker looking unemotional as usual.

Batchaser looked around the cats, bowing his head. "Look-- I-- I know what I did was wrong. I know I sent a fake prophecy, but... but I remember who killed me."

Gasps came from the group. "What? But that's impossible!" cats spoke up.

Batchaser shook his head. "It's not. And he killed me so... mercilessly. I never wanted to destroy the Clans. I just... wanted for him to suffer through what I did."

Cats began to open their mouths to respond until they stared in shock at something behind Batchaser. The black tom's ears lifted and he whipped around, yowling in shock when Shellstar slammed

him into the ground. The white tom began to smash a rock to the warrior's head. "This will never be over!" he growled. "You ruined the Clans! You deserve to die!"

Batchaser couldn't fight back. The rock rattled his head. It felt as if everything in his head was spilling out. Black spots danced over his vision, close to covering them. He couldn't even speak.

"Shellstar! You gave up!" Jackalstar exclaimed, her voice growing louder as she ran over to the two.

The white tom turned and chunked the rock at Jackalstar. She gasped and ducked, barely missing. Cats in the group leapt out of the way. Shellstar whirled back to Batchaser and slammed his head into the ground repeatedly.

Blood splattered on the ground. Shellstar's paws were covered in the crimson-red liquid, his eyes looking dark, unwelcoming and cold; something Batchaser had never seen in the usually calm and almost stupid tom.

It looked like everyone hid something behind a mask.

Batchaser wheezed heavily, trying to breathe. His head dropped, his jaws quivering. The tom coughed up clots of blood and curled in a ball, trying to ease the pain. Shellstar watched with a smirk.

The last thing Batchaser saw that day was a dark, cloudy sky above his head, the storm growing even heavier as his life slipped away from. Then, everything turned black.

A/N: woah!! Two updates in two days? Amazing!

Anyway, guess that was a surprise to see Shellstar like that, huh? He's hiding more than you think...

Stay tuned for the next chapter! Batchaser wakes up in a strange place and has to figure out where he is and what to do.

Please vote and comment your thoughts, and may StarClan light your path✨

Chapter 11 || The Forgotten Eternity

Batchaser awoke with a start. His blue eyes snapped open, his fur fluffing out as he jumped to his paws. The black tom gasped in agony, crumpling to the ground when pain struck him in his head like lightning bolts. He gritted his teeth as he placed his paw on his forehead, flinching from the thrumming headache. He noticed smeared blood all over his body, wincing as he examined his other side.

I still have wounds from my fight with Shellstar...

Then, it struck him. He was alive! He smiled widely but quickly returned back to his normal facade, narrowing his blue eyes. *But... I died. I remember it. So where am I?*

But what if he hadn't died and was still in StarClan? Batchaser would honestly be ecstatic; he truly didn't want to disappear forever. *Unless I've been reincarnated?*

He shook his head. *No, I would be a kit... and I wouldn't have my wounds.*

So, if he hadn't been reincarnated then he had to still be in StarClan. *But who saved me?*

Batchaser just began to notice the looming forest trees around him. He furrowed his brows and stood up slowly, forcing the pain down as much as he possibly could. His eyes flickered from side to side as he made his way through a winding dirt path, hoping it lead somewhere.

Maybe it was Jackalstar, he thought. *She did try and help me right before Shellstar... smashed my head in with a rock and then slammed my head into the ground several times*. A growl wrenched from his throat, but he forced himself to think of something else.

For some reason, this place didn't seem like StarClan. It gave him an uneasy feeling, like a stone was lodged in his stomach, pulling him to the ground below. His ears flicked back in discomfort. Batchaser raised his gaze to the sky but could hardly make out anything past the towering trees. He did, however, see specks of gray. That was odd... StarClan had been a much darker gray, like a storm was coming. This was simply... clouds.

"Hello?" Batchaser couldn't stop the stupid question from leaving his jaws. He just wanted to be found, no matter how embarrassing it was, and someone *had* to be around to give him a helping paw. Right?

After a long moment of silence the black tom came to the conclusion that no one was near, and even if they were they certainly wouldn't be helping him. A shiver crept down his spine. What if he was in the Dark Forest? Was that even possible?

Swallowing back the lump in his throat, Batchaser forced himself to stand back to his paws. His muscles ached, his limbs feeling like they were about to snap in half. The black tom gritted his teeth and held back a screech of pain, tears watering in the sides of his eyes. But he realized he couldn't act like a little kit and stopped himself from showing any more signs of anguish.

The former ShadowClanner managed to make it to his paws, black spots edging his vision. He felt like he was going to faint, honestly. Batchaser ducked his head and screwed his eyes shut, taking in deep breaths to try and calm himself down. He could do this. He could do this. *He could do this*.

"Just w-walk forward, you lazy lump," he grumbled to himself, blue eyes narrowing as he took a shaky step forward. Pain rocketed through his body and he almost fell back down, but luckily was balanced enough on his paws to where that didn't happen. Batchaser moved his other paws, suddenly wishing he was actually dead instead of having to endure this pain. Wouldn't that be nice.

The former warrior followed a dirt trail in the forest, tail whipping behind him as he walked. Batchaser was slowly gaining speed, and when he told himself, *The pain isn't real, it's all in your*

head, it actually seemed to help. The trees eventually began to clear out to reveal a moor much like the one in StarClan. However, dead trees and bushes were clumped in several parts of the flat land, flowers dipping downward as the life was taken from them. Batchaser emerged from the foliage, taking in the scenery with more care. Dead grass, dead plants, dead trees... he looked up to the sky and almost staggered back in shock, eyes widening to the size of full moons.

Sheets of gray clouds covered the blue above, darkening the ground with every layer it added on. A shape was behind the clouds, and when it finally emerged, its colors were revealed: a blood-red sun hung in sky.

A BLOOD-RED SUN IS IN THE SKY. WHAT IN STA-- WHAT IS GOING ON?

Batchaser felt like throwing up. He pushed himself to look away, his lip curling as tears once again welled in his eyes. For once in his life, Batchaser was *scared*. He was *lost*. He didn't know what to do... he felt more alone than he ever had before, even after Lynxbite died. At least then he'd had ShadowClan to fight for; now, did he even have *anything*?

You are so stupid and so horrible and just complete dung brain! No wonder I'm here I completely deserve this torture for what I've done I'm so sorry mother, father, brother, Lynxbite, my—

A scream suddenly wrenched from Batchaser's throat as a heavy body was thrown against him. His body felt like it had been stung by hundreds of wasps and he writhed in agony, jaws cracking open as another pained yowl filled the air. He tried to curl into a ball but the cat above clearly wasn't going to let him. It was some sort of cream feline, discolored and cold eyes staring into his soul. Batchaser began to cry. *Kill me! Kill me! Kill me!*

"Hm, and I thought I was pathetic." The cat above him ticked its claws, curling its lip in disgust. "Just wait, you stupid maggot. You're *really* going to want to be dead after what I do to you."

A/N: Yeah yeah yeah, I know it's been two months and I'm

really sorry about that. I've been working on some other stories and roleplays and it's been hard to keep track of my more inactive books, but I finally updated! It's nice to get back into writing Batchaser. He's so interesting to me and I love him <3

Anywho, again, sorry for the super late update guys! Hope you can forgive me haha. Thanks for reading, and I hope you enjoyed! Please vote and comment your thoughts, and may StarClan light your path✨

Chapter 12 || The Confusing Calico

Batchaser's heart pumped heavily in his chest as he was held down by the other feline. The tears were fuzzy in his vision but he forced himself to calm down. He examined the cat above him, eyes narrowing a bit. It was a calico she-cat, one brown eye on her left side and one blue eye on her right. They were unmistakably pained, chips of ice embedded inside which made it appear as if a snowflake was falling into the depths of her iris. A huge scar ran from her chin, through her lip, and above her eye, ripping through her left ear as it crossed over her whole face. Her claws were long and stone-looking, and her teeth poked out of her jaws as she glared down at Batchaser.

"Y-You aren't going to do anything to me," he spat, forcing his fur to lie flat. He'd have to do the one thing he knew best: be hostile.

A shrill, hoarse laugh left the calico's throat, her eyes shining with something Batchaser couldn't quite place. "Brave one, are you? This is a nice catch... there's no telling what I can do." Okay, he finally placed it. She had to be a psychopath. "Rip your claws and whiskers off? Gouge out your eyes?" A smirk crept on her scarred face. "*Rip you open and play in your insides*?"

"You crazy bastard!" Batchaser snarled, trying to wriggle free from her grasp. He was too weak to, however, and she clearly had done this before. That's what scared the black tom.

"I can smell your fear-scent," she whispered, thrusting her muzzle in his face. "That's what I like the most, dear one." Her breath smelled awful. Batchaser felt like his heart was truly going to explode.

Then, suddenly, literally out of nowhere, exactly like the cliché, "Hey I'm here to save you just before you get murdered," plot, a

small body threw itself at the calico and knocked her off of Batchaser. She snarled and whirled around, snapping at the cat that had bowled into her. The former ShadowClanner was almost too shocked to stand but managed to do it, pain ripping through his body. He staggered to his paws and gasped at the sight before him.

Rushingpaw was here to save him!

The small gray tom was baring his teeth at the crazy she-cat, who reeled backward and slammed the apprentice into the ground with her paw. For a moment Batchaser feared she was going to kill him, then she starting laughing hysterically, falling on her tail and rolling onto her back. "YOU TWO ACTUALLY BELIEVED ME!" She wheezed and sort of keeled over.

Batchaser and Rushingpaw looked at each other. Then the black tom's ears whipped up when he realized who had just saved him. "Rushingpaw!" He propelled himself toward the apprentice, but told himself not to get to close. Batchaser didn't want it to look like he cared. He relaxed his tensed shoulders and let his face fall into the expression of blankness. "Uh, what are you doing here?"

Rushingpaw gulped, ducking his head. Batchaser found it hard to hear the little gray tom from the calico's laughing. "Sh-Shellstar..."

The former ShadowClanner's claws sunk into the ground. "What did he do?"

"W-Well, after he killed you... there was sort of chaos?" The apprentice tipped his head to the side a bit. "Jackalstar attacked him and so did a few others. Some cats went over to see if you were alive... you weren't. Then I got mad and attacked Shellstar and, well, he killed me." Sadness made itself apparent in Rushingpaw's gaze.

Batchaser's heart dropped in his chest. "Rushingpaw, I'm so sorry. I know I caused--"

"HEY! Will you two stop blabbering and LISTEN to me? I've never seen such gullible cats!" The calico cut in, laughing again but

eventually regaining her posture. She was actually quite regal-looking when Batchaser observed her, the calico looking less crazy as she watched the two closely.

"So..." Batchaser tucked his tail closely around his body awkwardly. "Was that all... fake?"

"Oh STARS. Of course it was fake, you idiot!" Her voice was gruff, much lower than any she-cat's he'd ever heard. "I do that to everyone that comes here. No one thinks it's that funny. I've even been told they had no idea I was joking! *I* knew I was joking!"

Batchaser and Rushingpaw exchanged glances.

The calico grumbled and sheathed her claws. "Fine, whatever, you're no fun anyway." She huffed and turned, ready to walk off.

"Wait!" Batchaser was surprised to see Rushingpaw leap forward. "Wh...Where are we? Who are you?"

"That *joke* wasn't really funny either," the black tom added in, brows furrowing. "I really thought you were crazy or something."

The calico turned around, a surprised look on her face. "Crazy? I might be a little, but who wouldn't, living here for decades?"

Rushingpaw gasped. "Decades?"

"Yes, fool, or are you deaf?" the calico asked, her voice suddenly turning very cruel. Her discolored eyes were glimmering with anger. "I was sent here long ago, longer than I can even remember. And I thought StarClan was bad." She snorted, batting a stray leaf off of her face.

"This isn't StarClan, then?" Batchaser inquired, looking around.

The calico's gaze dropped. "Are you really that stupid? The only way to get here is through StarClan or The Dark Forest. Look around, you imbecile. This isn't StarClan." She paused, craning her muzzle to the sky. Batchaser grimaced at the blood-colored sun. "And INCASE you didn't somehow notice, we have a red sun. Now, ask me another question because I'm bored and no one ever comes

here."

Rushingpaw opened and closed his jaws a few times. "Wh-Where exactly is *here*?"

The she-cat hesitated, digging her claws into the dirt. Hurt flashed behind her cold eyes and for a moment, Batchaser wondered if her whole personality was just an act. Quite possibly.

"This place is called The Forgotten Eternity," the calico began, dipping her head a little. "Cats that die in StarClan or The Dark Forest are sent here."

"I thought if you were killed in StarClan you just... disappeared," Batchaser murmured.

"I thought you got reincarnated," Rushingpaw added. Batchaser shivered.

"Nope." The calico shrugged, looking around. "It's sort of like a punishment place, I guess? I mean, there's hardly any prey, you forever keep the wounds you received when you died in StarClan, and it's just terrible and gloomy here. Now ask me another question because I enjoy feeling like a god." She smirked. "I don't get visitors much, and if I do I usually scare them off."

"Wonder why..." Batchaser grumbled sarcastically.

"Okay, who are you, then?" Rushingpaw inquired.

That made this calico's interest perk up. A smile stretched on her jaws, her eyes suddenly looking old and ancient. Batchaser just noticed the gray creeping up her muzzle. "Me? Well, little kit, you wouldn't have heard of me." Her jagged canines flashed behind her jaws. "My name is Cypressfall. I'm older than the moons themselves, kit." She rested her piercing gaze on Batchaser. "Now, my turn. Who are you two?"

"I'm an apprentice..." Rushingpaw mumbled.

The black tom gulped, looking down at the small gray tom before looking back at Cypressfall. His breath caught in his throat.

What was he supposed to say? *"Oh, hey, I'm the cat that created a fake prophecy and ruined the Clans so I was brutally murdered by some crazy former leader because of it. And this idiot over here that I don't even like is suddenly my sidekick."*

Batchaser narrowed his blue eyes, finally knowing what to say. Cypressfall luckily didn't know them, so the black tom could pretty much say whatever he wanted.

"Our names are Batchaser and Rushingpaw, and we're here to save you from The Forgotten Eternity."

A/N: AYYY two updates in less than 24 hours? I'm pretty proud of myself to be honest! I wrote this on a plane while listening to Chaos Chaos's *Do You Feel It?* so I guess it was sort of inspiration for this chapter.

If you didn't already notice (since I try to connect the universes between my stories), Cypressfall is a character from Cougarstripe's Shock. Since Bound to Stars takes place long after that series, Cypressfall has been in The Forgotten Eternity for a long time. I'm planning on making a timeline soon!

Anyway, thank you all for reading! You're all amazing. Please vote and comment your thoughts, and may StarClan light your path✨

Chapter 13 || Agreement

Cypressfall didn't look nearly as impressed as Batchaser had wished. She gave them both a doubtful glare and ticked her claws, looking down at them in disinterest. "Uh, no."

Batchaser twitched an ear. "Uh, yes. StarClan sent us down here to get you."

"Then why were you so scared?" she challenged. "And why did your little friend save you?"

"H-Hey! I'm not little!" Rushingpaw piped up.

Cypressfall snorted. "Don't lie to yourself, runt."

Batchaser bit back from defending the apprentice. He had to act like he didn't care. No, he *didn't* care. No act was needed.

"Well, we didn't really... uh, know we were coming here. It just happened." Batchaser paused, thinking of what to say.

"But StarClan called us here for a reason!" Rushingpaw exclaimed cheerfully. "I know it. We still have things to do back in the real world. And I know we met you for a reason, so obviously you're destined to help us."

Cypressfall looked between the two with a cocked brow. "Destined, eh? If anyone knows anything about *destiny*, it's me, kit. And trust me when I say this. Destiny isn't real."

Rushingpaw's face fell. Batchaser looked away, his paws scrabbling in the dirt.

"I was always told I had some great, amazing future with my sister." The words rolled off her tongue bitterly. "My trust in providence didn't hold up, unfortunately. Especially when I was betrayed." Her claws scored the ground. "So don't hold StarClan up so highly, little one. And you, Bat... Bat-whoever-you-are. Don't

believe their lies. All they want is complete control. And trust me, they have it. My foolish Clanmates couldn't see the difference between a dead mouse and an omen foreseeing the destruction of Fourtrees."

Rushingpaw tipped his head to the side. "Fourtrees?"

Cypressfall looked bewildered. "Yes. Have you been living under a rock all of your life?"

Batchaser twitched his tail irritably. "Apparently I have as well. I've never heard of this 'Fourtrees' place."

Her jaws gaped open. "But... But that's where Clan meetings go to every full moon..."

"We meet on the island," Batchaser scowled. What nonsense was she talking about?

"RiverClan's island?" she questioned.

"*No*!" Batchaser gritted his teeth in exasperation. "RiverClan doesn't live on an island."

The spark in Cypressfall's eyes was gone. "You've left."

"Left where?" Rushingpaw inquired.

"Don't listen to her," the black tom hissed. "She speaks no language of ours. She's crazy."

"No," the calico she-cat snapped. "Your mind is too small to comprehend what I speak of." Batchaser opened his jaws to retort something but she spoke before he had time to. "The Clans. They moved. Left their former territory for a new one. That is the only thing that makes sense. I am... decades old."

Rushingpaw straightened up. "Wow! Really?! Can you tell us anything about your old home?"

Batchaser shoved the runt apprentice aside. "No," he snarled, his mew sharp. "We didn't come here to share stories of the past. We've

come because we need you to tell us how to get out of here."

Cypressfall was quiet before she went into a laughing fit. A growl thrummed deep inside Batchaser's throat. He wanted to claw this stupid she-cat's ears off! He took a step forward, eyes ablaze. "Hey! Cut it out. Tell us how to get out of here."

"*Get out of here*?" Cypressfall wiped tears from her eyes. "Silly you. There's no getting out of here."

It felt like a stone dropped in Batchaser's stomach.

"What?"

The calico stood to her four paws, swishing her tail behind her. "No one has ever left the Forgotten Eternity. It is sealed by StarClan's spell. That is why it's hell here."

"So... there isn't any way we can escape?" Rushingpaw's voice was thick with emotion.

Cypressfall paused. "Well, I never said there wasn't a way to *leave*. It's just that no one has ever been able to actually get to their destination."

Batchaser's fur bristled, his fangs showing. "Then just tell us where we need to go! We'll make it."

"Long shot," the she-cat snorted, licking her paw and drawing it over her ear.

Batchaser was filled with such rage he nearly exploded. Thankfully Rushingpaw took a step forward, holding the ShadowClan warrior back. "Look, Cypressfall, we really must return to our StarClan lives." His voice was soft and gentle.

"Why would you ever want to go back *there*?" she growled. "Far as I'm concerned, I'd rather be torn apart by rabid beasts than to have to face the sister that murdered me." Cypressfall looked angry but it was gone in an instant.

Rushingpaw's eyes were pleading. "I beg you, Cypressfall. Just

tell us."

Her furrowed brows dropped and she let out a sigh, drawing something in the dirt. "Okay."

Turning around, she narrowed her eyes and both Batchaser and Rushingpaw followed her gaze. They landed upon a large mountain in the distance, storm clouds circling around the peak.

"That's it," Cypressfall murmured, her voice suddenly quiet. "But there are many dangers along the way. No cat has ever made it."

"How do you know?" Batchaser questioned suspiciously.

"Because when I was killed in StarClan I was one of the first ones here." Her mismatched eyes looked distant. "A cat came not too long after me. They went into the forest. That is the first mark of the dragon's claw." Cypressfall hesitated. "I heard his screams all night. He never returned. I told myself I would never give away the answer to escape to anyone because I couldn't bear to know that I sent another feline to their death."

Rushingpaw shuddered. Batchaser was silent.

Cypressfall suddenly met their gazes. "You must not go."

"Well we aren't rotting here," the black tom snapped back, his tail lashing behind him.

"I'm sorry," Rushingpaw murmured, "but we have to leave. StarClan needs us."

Cypressfall looked crestfallen. "If you say so."

The gray apprentice's ears pricked. "Oh... and, uh, can you tell us what the dragon's claw is? You mentioned it in your story."

It seemed like the calico's voice was caught in her throat. "The dragon's claw is the five points in which you must pass before you reach the top of the mountain. They grow in order from simplest to hardest." Cypressfall paused. "The first is the Darkening Forest. And.... well, no one has made it past the first. But there are five,

just like five dragon claws."

Rushingpaw dipped his head, looking grateful. "Thank you, Cypressfall. Your information will help us a lot. Really."

Batchaser avoided the she-cat's gaze and walked past the apprentice. "Come on," he growled. "We shouldn't waste any more time."

"O-Okay..." Rushingpaw said, continuing to cast looks back at the calico.

The apprentice suddenly stopped behind Batchaser, which caused the black tom to groan in exasperation and whip around. "What now?"

But it was like the small gray tom hadn't even heard him. "Cypressfall, because *we're*—" Rushingpaw shot a look back at Batchaser "—so appreciative of what you told us, I just... wanted to ask if you'd come along?"

The calico's eyes lit up with surprise. But she suddenly shrunk away, looking unsure.

Batchaser groaned even louder and stamped his paw in the ground. "Seriously?! You little brat, why wouldn't you discuss this with me first? We don't have time to have another cat that'll just drag us behind!"

Rushingpaw ignored Batchaser. "I understand if you don't want to, but I think with more of us we can make it. And StarClan is different now. You might like it better."

"Yeah... *might*," Cypressfall grumbled uncertainly. "But... I've been here so long, I suppose I have nothing to lose." She suddenly straightened up, a new fire in her eyes. "Okay, I'll come along."

"UGHHHH." Batchaser whipped around furiously.

"Great!" Rushingpaw jumped on his paws. "Come on, then, let's go!"

And so the angry, the delighted, and the curious began their quest to the five dragon claws. But they knew not of what lied ahead of them... and how difficult this journey would really be.

A/N: Haha I suck another two months

More dialogue in this one but I actually enjoyed writing it. Gave a little more details on the Forgotten Eternity and how to escape and such. Also delved a little deeper into Cypressfall's character.

Anyway, hope you enjoyed! Please vote and comment your thoughts, and may StarClan light your path!🌟

Chapter 14 || Darkening Forest

The first mark of the dragon's claw hadn't been far. Batchaser, Rushingpaw, and Cypressfall had walked a little ways before a dark forest came into view. The trees were clustered together, an eerie feeling in the area. Everything was silent except the pawsteps of the three cats.

Batchaser hadn't been particularly excited for this journey. His pelt had been prickling the whole time, his teeth bared and his eyes narrowed. He was still furious over the fact that Rushingpaw hadn't asked him about bringing along the crazy she-cat first, but tried to convince himself that all would be fine. After all, an extra set of paws wouldn't hurt... right?

"So who created the Forgotten Eternity?"

Rushingpaw's question snapped him back into reality. His blue eyes flicked to the runt apprentice, huffing and twitching an ear. Who cared? They wouldn't be in here long anyway.

"Well," Cypressfall began, "I've heard many tales over my decades here. That secret StarClan cats created it—"

"Like ThunderClan?" Batchaser scowled.

"Hey, shut it, dingo," the calico snapped back. "I'm from ThunderClan. You should be careful—"

"Ohhhhhh great. We've brought along another useless ThunderClanner." Batchaser growled and whipped his tail in Rushingpaw's face. "You see what an annoyance you've invited to come with us?"

"Well..." The apprentice looked down. "ThunderClan really isn't that bad. I mean—"

Batchaser whipped around, blue eyes slits. "I was murdered by

ThunderClan. Don't even *try* to defend them. They're heartless idiots that care nothing about anyone else."

"I'm *right here*," Cypressfall hissed through clenched teeth.

"I don't really care," the black tom snapped. "I'll never forgive ThunderClan or the lunatic cat that murdered me. So how about you just shut up? No one cares about your stupid stories."

"Hey! I do!" Rushingpaw growled.

"Oh, good for you," Batchaser sneered, "you're being sucked into her trap. But that's what they all get you to do." His mind flashed back to Jackalstar and the notion of the ThunderClan leader filled him with even more rage.

Cypressfall curled her lip. "What's wrong with you? I've never met such a cruel cat."

Batchaser was quiet, brimming with anger. "You're not the first to say that."

The calico rounded on Rushingpaw. "How do you deal with him?"

The gray tom ducked his head, hesitating to speak. "He and Jackalstar showed me StarClan when no one else did. I died so early on I... didn't have anyone there for me."

"That's about all he's done for you, huh?" Cypressfall concluded with a huff.

Rushingpaw didn't respond.

"Well, if you want to leave because you can't handle my mouth then please, go. I'd really love for you to do that," Batchaser growled.

"I'm good," Cypressfall answered.

Rushingpaw was silent for a while before turning his head toward Batchaser, an angry glint in his eyes. "Why do you have to

argue with everyone? We're just trying to help but you push everyone down and make them feel horrible."

"Cats have pushed themselves down enough," he spat. "I'm just helping them realize who they truly are. I don't see anything wrong with that."

Lies. Batchaser hated who he'd become, but it was the mask he had. He would not allow it to slip.

Rushingpaw's claws flexed. "Well, I do! You make me wish I'd never met you!"

"I wish I hadn't ever met you either," Batchaser ranted. "But we don't all get what we want. I was murdered, you died early, and now we're stuck with a crazy she-cat who's probably going to get us killed. So suck it up or leave. I don't care."

Rushingpaw flinched. "You're not the only one that's angry, Batchaser. I died too, and I don't even know what happened to me. How do you think that made me feel?"

"Yeah? Well you didn't lose the only cat that loved you!" Batchaser snarled, whipping around and scratching the apprentice across the cheek. Cypressfall watched, her paws rooted to the ground.

Rushingpaw looked shocked, his jaws gaping open. But he narrowed his eyes and leapt at the black tom, flailing his paws to scratch any part of him he could. "You're a terrible cat, Batchaser!"

"Yeah, I know!" The black tom threw him off and wiped blood from his cheek, panting. "But you didn't live nearly as long as I did. I saw more than you. So don't act all special since you died early. You can blame your mentor for that one."

Something flashed in Rushingpaw's eyes but he didn't say anything. "I hate you."

Batchaser scowled. "I know. You've said that about ten times."

"You two fight like kits," Cypressfall suddenly grumbled. "We're

never going to make it through the forest if you two bicker and attack each other every two minutes. Apologize and let's move on."

Rushingpaw raised his chin, smirking at Batchaser. "Well? Go ahead, apologize."

The ShadowClanner rolled his eyes. "As if. I didn't do anything." He whipped around and continued to walk on.

"Hey!" The apprentice's angry mew sounded behind him.

Suddenly, a loud crunch filled the forest. Batchaser stopped, his ears swiveling upward and his eyes widening. The two other cats stopped beside him, looking around along with the warrior.

"Did you hear that?" Rushingpaw whispered.

"No, we're just looking around the forest for no reason at all," Batchaser said sarcastically.

Cypressfall twitched her tail. "I don't know what lives in this forest. It could be anything."

The black tom didn't respond. He heard another crunch and whipped his head in that direction, standing as still as possible. His companions grew as quiet as he did.

Red eyes blinked open, meeting Batchaser's gaze. The pupils turned to slits and suddenly a deep snarl filled the area. Then, a blur of gray dove claws-first toward the group.

A/N: AYYY TWO UPDATES IN ONE DAY HOW ABOUT THAT

This is the first book I improvised in the beginning and actually planned later. My creative juices have been running and I'm nearly finished with Dawn of the Clans so inspiration! Expect more updates! And if I don't update within a week or two come on here and scream at me please I need to update more because I love this book and want to finish it okay (BUT HEY I'm gonna try to update it before that I promise)

But uh we still have a long while to go. I'm looking ahead to

25+ more chapters. I have a lot of future plans that are going to include some... eh.... mythological stuff so get ready for that. I mean Warriors is already a fantasy series but this is a separate universe/dimension from the original, so stuff will be changed. As in more mythological aspects.

Some questions:

-Who's your favorite character so far? (I know I ask this one a lot but I like to know if your opinions change)

-What challenges do you think the three companions will face in the Forgotten Eternity?

-What jumped out at them at the end of this chapter?

-What's going down back in the real world/StarClan?

Anywho, I hope you enjoyed! Please vote and comment your thoughts, and may StarClan light your path!🌟

Chapter 15 || Hound Territory

Before even thinking of what he was doing, Batchaser quickly pushed Rushingpaw out of the way. The gray creature tore into his flank, a gasp wrenching from the black tom's throat as blood splattered on the ground. He pummeled the creature with unsheathed claws, looking up at it and realizing what he was really dealing with here.

A wolf.

The huge gray dog ripped out Batchaser's fur, snarling viciously as it clamped its jaws around his body. He gritted his teeth in pain and attempted to twist around, trying to bat at the wolf's eyes.

Luckily, however, Cypressfall was there. The calico she-cat flung herself on its back, hissing and spitting words Batchaser couldn't even hear. The wolf turned its head, dropping the black warrior in a cloud of dust to try and snap at Cypressfall.

Staggering to his paws, Batchaser reared up while the dog was distracted and attempted to slice open it's underbelly. A large cut was made along its chest, though not nearly deep enough to cause fatal damage. Turning back to him, the wolf growled and leapt forward with sharp teeth.

"Hey! Leave my friends alone!"

Rushingpaw was there. The apprentice hooked his claws into the creature's skin, tearing away at anything he could and swiping for one of its eyes. A booming shriek sounded from the wolf as it scampered away, a large scar now evident across its left eye.

"Good job, Rushingpaw!" Cypressfall praised, but didn't have much more time until the wolf was going after her. The fur along her back spiked up but it didn't scare the huge dog at all.

Narrowing his blue eyes, Batchaser sprinted after and sliced his claws down the wolf's underbelly again. Another pained howl came

from its large jaws, blood splattering on the ground. It turned its one good eye to the ShadowClanner, snapping its head forward and trapping Batchaser in its jaws.

The wolf was bleeding out, but it was far from dead. It clamped down harder on the black tom, shaking him around as if he were a piece of prey. His body felt light as dizziness took over his vision, causing the world to spin around him. Batchaser felt like he might throw up, and along with the immense amount of agony from the wolf's sharp canines, he wasn't sure if he was even going to live.

He could see Cypressfall and Rushingpaw trying to attack and distract the creature, but it seemed intent on killing Batchaser first. Its teeth continued to sink in deeper and deeper, more blood running down the wolf's chin and staining the ground.

Darkness swarmed his vision. Batchaser wondered if he should just let himself die like this. He was aware that no one would miss him, so what was the point of fighting anymore? Letting his limbs and body go limp, the black tom sucked in what he guessed would be his last breath of air.

Batchaser did wonder where he'd go after this. If he died in The Forgotten Eternity, he guessed he wouldn't be given any more chances at life. After all, that's *why* they had these wolves here and the five marks of the dragon's claw. It was to kill cats that tried to escape.

Batchaser thought about his life. He wasn't sure why he had been allowed into StarClan anyway—he was a terrible cat, bringing others down just to make himself feel a little bit better. Rushingpaw and Cypressfall had been right. He was a horrible excuse for a feline. He was hated. So why even continue to live?

Suddenly, Batchaser could breathe again. He let out ragged coughs as his body dropped on the ground, blood spilling from his jaws. He closed his eyes and saw that darkness ebbing away at his vision, begging to take him.

But he was alive.

So he stumbled to his paws, pushed those selfish thoughts out of his mind, and staggered toward a nearby tree.

"Batchaser!" Rushingpaw gasped, running over to the injured tom. "I–I thought you were dead!"

The black tom shook his head, his heart thumping against his ribcage. "I–I'm fine," the ShadowClanner croaked.

"No, you aren't fine," Rushingpaw fretted. "Cypressfall, please come help him!"

"I said I'm *fine*." Batchaser's eyes narrowed and he turned his back on the apprentice, truly believing he was okay. However... that didn't go over so well when he staggered to the ground and fell on his side.

From this angle, Batchaser could actually see the wolf. Just like him, it was rolled on its side, eyes clouded as it emotionlessly stared at the sky. *Like him.* Maybe this was some... omen or something. That Batchaser had to stop listening to his mask. Maybe being injured to near-death was karma for his own treatment to others.

No, that was stupid. Omens were messages from StarClan used only for selfish reasons. And Batchaser wasn't even sure if StarClan could contact him through The Forgotten Eternity. It seemed no one knew about it, not even the oh-so-wise Jackalstar. The wolf had been nothing but an average animal attacking them.

Then came that dream-like state again. As if nothing was real. As if he were dead. Well, he was dead. He'd died twice. But this was like he wasn't even alive in The Forgotten Eternity. It was hard to listen to what Cypressfall was saying and the gaze in his vision was getting stronger, but he was finally able to make out her words.

"Batchaser. Batchaser, *listen to me*. Eat these herbs. They'll help you." The black tom's eyes flicked down and he inclined his head forward, lapping up the herbs and letting his head rest back on the soft, grassy ground, the dark trees towering above him.

The ShadowClan warrior didn't even feel Cypressfall wrap his

wounds up with cobweb. His mind was a fuzz. He couldn't even comprehend what pain was.

"Come on, Batchaser. Come back to us."

Those words. They sounded... they sounded so much like her.

"Lynxbite?" he whispered hoarsely, a smile spreading across his jaws. "Is that you?"

There were quiet whispers before there was an answer. "No."

"Oh." Batchaser was able to crack open his eyes, his ears flicking back at the sight of Cypressfall and Rushingpaw again. It wasn't her after all.

"Come on, we need to get out of here," the calico she-cat meowed slowly. "Let's help you up."

"I'm hurt, not deaf," he snapped. Being talked to like a kit made the ShadowClanner angry.

"Looks like he's okay," Rushingpaw sighed.

Cypressfall nodded. "That's a relief."

Batchaser looked down, letting out a heavy breath before rising to his paws. "Let's go, then."

"Here, lean on me," Rushingpaw ordered.

"I can walk," the black tom spat. He lowered his head as he limped forward, pain shooting all the way up his body. Batchaser didn't complain, though. This was life. He would get through it.

"How much more of this stupid forest do we have?" Batchaser grumbled.

"A lot more," Cypressfall murmured.

"Great."

And with those last words, the three cats disappeared into the

darkness of the trees, waiting to see what they would come across next.

A/N: Okay seriously what is going on with me three updates in 2 days?????? This is insane seriously

I think it's cause I've wanted to write so bad but haven't had any inspiration and my writing has been terrible so YAY I'm finally back for a while knock on wood

Anywho, another update! Yayyyy. Please vote and comment your thoughts, and may StarClan light your path ✧

Chapter 16 || Wolf Howls

The night had dragged on for what seemed like centuries. Cypressfall didn't want to take many breaks so they wouldn't have the chance of getting attacked by another wolf, and water and food was hard to come by in the Darkening Forest. Not only that, but Batchaser could hardly keep his eyes open anymore. He was tired and injured. All he wanted to do was sleep.

The sky was much dimmer now, the red sun shifted into a darker crimson moon. A breeze blew through the trees and whipped Batchaser's whiskers back, but he enjoyed the wind. It reminded him of StarClan.

"Cypressfall?" The black tom heard Rushingpaw's exhausted croak. "H-How much longer?"

The calico she-cat's tail lashed behind her. "You've been asking me that all night. We'll rest when it's absolutely needed."

"It's *absolutely needed*." Batchaser shoved his way to the front and stopped in front of Cypressfall, his blue eyes dark. "We're resting here. *Now*. We haven't even seen a wolf for hours."

The she-cat's eyes narrowed. "That's a bad idea."

"If you're in such a hurry go ahead and leave," Batchaser growled. "We won't catch up to you unless you die, but really, either one is fine with me."

Cypressfall's eyes flashed with hurt but it was gone not a moment later. She shrugged. "Fine. Whatever. Do what you want." The calico trudged to one of the nearby trees and curled up beside it, closing her eyes and not making a sound.

Batchaser turned to Rushingpaw, who seemed to have not even heard he and Cypressfall's exchange. "Come on. We're resting," he grunted.

Just like the calico she-cat had, Batchaser stumbled over to a large tree and fell to the ground. He let out a heavy sigh and set his head down, almost getting pulled into a deep sleep.

Until Rushingpaw messed it up.

The gray apprentice walked over, not uttering a word as he laid next to Batchaser. The black tom's head snapped up, his blue eyes narrowing at the sight of the apprentice so close to him. *Purposely*.

The black tom used a weak paw to push Rushingpaw a few inches away. He turned his back on the apprentice, not wanting to be near anyone right now.

"B-Batchaser," Rushingpaw suddenly whispered, his voice scratchy as his teeth clattered together. "I-I'm cold."

"Deal with it," the black tom snapped.

Batchaser could imagine the look of rejection on the small gray tom's face but tried not to think about that. He needed to be alone or else he was going to blow up. And that's not something he wanted Rushingpaw and Cypressfall to deal with.

Cypressfall can shove her tail down her throat. I'm doing this for Rushingpaw, not her.

Was that true? Was Batchaser truly not doing something selfish for once? The black ShadowClanner knew he had a bit of an ego, but again, that was more of his mask... that snappiness was just for show. But it had become a part of him now. Ever since Lynxbite... the mask had come to him, and Batchaser had welcomed it. But now? He wanted it gone, though it was too late. *It was always too late*.

Suddenly, a low rumble made the black tom jerk back into reality. He stayed still, examining the dark terrain and looking for any sign of red eyes. Batchaser didn't see anything, but his heart felt like it was in his throat. Fear caused his pelt to spike up, but the ShadowClanner hoped that lying here without any movement would drive whatever creature was in the forest away.

"You heard it too?"

Cypressfall's mew nearly caused Batchaser to jump out of his skin. The black tom swiveled his head to the she-cat, brows furrowing as he nodded silently.

She craned her head up toward the tree the two were closest to. "Get Rushingpaw up there, quickly. I'll run over there when you both are safe."

The black tom nodded silently and slowly turned to the small apprentice, prodding him with his paw. "Rushingpaw, wake up."

A grunt only came from the runt.

His fur fluffing up with anger, Batchaser jabbed him in the side. Rushingpaw gasped and jumped to his paws, looking around. "What's going on?!"

The ShadowClanner huffed. "Come on, we need to climb." Batchaser jerked his head toward the tree behind him.

Rushingpaw gulped. "O–Okay. Why?"

"Just *go*!" he hissed, the tom's claws flexing.

The small tom didn't respond, gasping as he scampered up the trunk. Batchaser watched, his tail twitching as he looked around cautiously.

"Batchaser! Look out!"

A pair of snarling jaws was right behind the black tom. He quickly ducked, sliding under the wolf's belly and grasping onto the tree. He began to lift himself upward, tucking his tail in as the wolf snapped for him. Batchaser managed to clamber atop a branch, just below Rushingpaw, watching the creature with wide eyes.

Cypressfall! Where is she?

The ShadowClanner twisted his head around and watched as Cypressfall quietly climbed one of the other forest trees. Her

mismatched eyes glinted in the dark, watching the wolf sharply. It whined as it circled around Batchaser and Rushingpaw's tree, drool dripping from its mouth.

Suddenly, a scream wrenched from the apprentice as he began to freefall toward the ground. Batchaser's heart leapt into his throat and he swiftly reached forward, grabbing Rushingpaw's tail in his jaws. The black tom groaned as he hooked his sharp claws into the tree, trying to keep them both hoisted up. However, the wolf was already jumping hungrily toward the small gray tom, and Rushingpaw's squirming certainly wasn't helping.

"Stop moving!" Batchaser spat through a mouthful of fur.

The branch, flimsy on its own, was beginning to slowly lean down toward the ground. Batchaser felt fear rip through his body as they grew closer and closer to the jumping creature. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Cypressfall trying to leap to their tree, but the space was too far.

This is it. We're going to die, aren't we? Anger churned in Batchaser's chest. *I hate StarClan. Always have, always will. All they do is ruin everything. They don't even care about the cats they hurt, like me. They erase your memories and tell you you're special. But no one really is.*

"BATCHASER! WE'RE GETTING CLOSER TO IT!" Rushingpaw shrieked.

The black tom's fur spiked up. "I know," he said. "I can't do anything."

"BATCHASER! PLEASE—"

A huff from the wolf drew the ShadowClanner back into reality. He watched with a shocked expression as the gray creature fell to the ground, the life clouding out of its eyes. Batchaser let the two finally fall before the branch snapped, hitting the ground with a thud. Rushingpaw staggered to his paws, leaping back from the wolf as it twitched one last time before it died.

Cypressfall leapt from her own tree, padding over to see what had happened. She narrowed her eyes and placed her paws near an arrow in the wolf's side, then another, and Batchaser could see four arrows stuck in the creature.

"Who could've done this?" Rushingpaw whispered, creeping forward slowly.

"I don't know." Cypressfall shrugged. "Another cat, I guess. And they made arrows. I thought that was only a Twoleg thing."

"Me too," Batchaser grunted. "I've seen them once before, when we had to battle some stupid kittypets. Their Twoleg had a whole supply of arrows. It was weird." He narrowed his blue eyes. "But the question is *who* did this?"

More rustling in the bushes caused the three to jump, whipping around to the source of the noise.

"A–Another wolf?" Rushingpaw whispered.

Cypressfall scented the air. "No. It's... it's not a wolf... it must be __"

Two dark shapes appeared from the foliage, their eyes glowing as they stared the three other felines down. Batchaser drew in a breath, Rushingpaw hid behind the ShadowClanner, and Cypressfall slightly narrowed her eyes.

And then one of the strangers spoke. "You're safe now."

A/N: OKAYYYY I'm so happy I've planned every single chapter for this book so now all I have to do is write! I'm gonna try to aim for one chapter a day but we'll see? I have 60 chapters planned (plus the prologue, which is written, and the epilogue) so 62 chapters in all. This is a gonna be a long ride guys. Get ready!

Oh, since I didn't announce it on here already, I'm making an audiobook for Bound to Stars! You can try out for the characters that have made an appearance so far. If you're interested, go to my update book (*Paint Politics*) and you can

find the audition lines/info there (it'll be Bound to Stars audition info or something of the sort) so yeah! Please go check that out! I also have the YouTube video here if you'd rather watch that.

[There should be a GIF or video here. Update the app now to see it.]

Anyway, I hope you enjoyed this chapter! Sorry it's a little late, this week has been busy with band, school, etc. Hope you enjoyed nonetheless! And who do you think these new strangers are?

Please vote and comment your thoughts, and may StarClan light your path!✧

Chapter 17 || Newcomers

[image]

The stranger's voice rang in Batchaser's ears.

"Safe now, hm?" Batchaser walked up to them, lashing his tail. The black tom was suspicious.

"Indeed." The smaller one stepped up, the one that had spoken before, her yellow eyes dim against her brown and gray pelt.

"Batchaser, stand back." Cypressfall moved forward, twitching a torn ear. "They saved us. Isn't that right?"

The other cat, a bulky dark brown tom, moved forward. Batchaser could see his muscles rippling under his pelt. "That's right. It's why you should be grateful." His eyes landed on the black tom, a fire burning within them. "Unlike your friend here."

"He's not my friend." Batchaser was taken aback as he snapped his head toward the calico. "Just ignore him."

"Excuse me?" the ShadowClanner hissed. "I'm the one that's getting you out of this dump."

"What are your names?" Rushingpaw crept up from behind the two, ducking his head as he asked the question, cutting off Cypressfall from responding to the black tom.

The she-cat purred. "I'm Pepperclaw." She jerked her head toward the huge tom. "This is my brother, Spicetuft."

Stupid names, Batchaser almost growled, anger spiraling in his chest. They didn't need help. They were fine! The black tom turned away, narrowing his blue eyes as he stared through the forest. The three were close to the end of the Darkening Forest. Couldn't they get out of this already and *leave*?

"How did you two get here?" Batchaser heard the perky question

from Rushingpaw. He quickly spun around and jabbed the apprentice in the side with a paw, baring his teeth.

"Rushingpaw, you ask one more question and I'll rip your pelt off myself. The wolves won't even need to do that," Batchaser spat.

Cypressfall rammed into Batchaser, her eyes ablaze. She leaned down and whispered in his ear. "These strangers helped us, kid. Stop being horrible and let us do the talking. *For once*."

Batchaser shook her off. "Whatever. If you don't want me to be myself that's fine. I'll just sit here and watch you all have stupid small talk."

Cypressfall didn't say anything, wrapping a tail around Rushingpaw and pulling him forward. Batchaser scowled.

"So, please." Cypressfall's purr sent Batchaser into a full-on rage. "Tell us how you got here."

Pepperclaw piped up, a half-smile crossing her muzzle. Batchaser just noticed the three claw marks circled around her eye. The scar had paled and had been grown over with her own mismatched fur. Maybe a wolf had done that. *Why do I care?* Batchaser reminded himself. He slumped his shoulders and looked away in boredom.

"Well, Spicetuft and I grew up in ThunderClan." Batchaser groaned out loud but was ignored by the other felines. "Our father was the leader. His name was Dogstar."

"Dogstar? That is the DUMBEST name I've ever heard!" Batchaser exclaimed in a half-wheezing laugh. Cypressfall turned to glare at him and he snapped his jaws shut. "Right. Sorry, *my queen*." The calico scowled and whipped around, angling her ears forward to listen to the story.

"Our mother... well, she had been a medicine cat. She and my father's bond was sacred at one point... before she died. Lots of our Clanmates rejected us despite her passing, and even the other Clans had gotten a hold of the news. As soon as we had become warriors ShadowClan set out to kill us. We were terrified." Pepperclaw

looked down and her brother straightened up to begin talking.

Before he could do that, however, Batchaser snorted. "Uhhhhh huh. Come onnnn, does anyone here really *believe* that?"

He looked around and all the other cats stared at him.

"Oh." He huffed and rolled his eyes. "I forgot we had three ThunderClanners here and a useless RiverClanner."

"Hey! I'm not useless!" Rushingpaw protested.

"Keep telling yourself that," Batchaser grumbled.

"What do you mean 'does anyone really believe that'? Does anyone really believe *what*?" Spicetuft swiftly moved forward, his shoulders wider than Batchaser's whole body.

The ShadowClanner craned his head up to meet Spicetuft's eyes. "I'm not scared of you," he growled, his claws curling into the ground. "So how about you stop trying to intimidate me? It just makes you look stupid."

"Pepperclaw?" The dark brown tom whirled around. "Will you give me permission to claw him?"

"Just *answer* the question!" Cypressfall hissed. "Stop being difficult."

"Hmph." Batchaser shrugged. "I said that because I find it *extremely* hard to believe that ThunderClan would ever turn against one of its own."

"What Clan are you from?" Spicetuft asked suspiciously.

The blue-eyed tom puffed out his chest. "ShadowClan."

The ThunderClanner huffed. "Figures. But I'm not telling my story to you, anyway. You disrespect those that are dead."

"I *am* dead, you dumb idiot," Batchaser snapped. "I insult everyone. Don't act like you're so special."

"Let's just finish this story before you and that ShadowClanner fight," Pepperclaw finally cut in. "Plus, we don't want more trouble with wolves."

Spicetuft nodded and set himself beside his smaller sister. The she-cat cleared her throat and continued. "Anyway, ShadowClan waged war against us. They murdered many of our cats. ThunderClan blamed us, but our father was the only one that really cared. That is..." Pepperclaw choked on a sob. "Until.... until..."

"Until?" Batchaser asked with a raised brow, annoyance clear in his voice.

"Until they killed our father," Spicetuft finished.

Batchaser snorted and looked away.

"After that, the deputy became leader. His name was Rockstar—"

These are the worst names I've ever heard in my entire life.

"—and he kicked us out. ShadowClan had been spying on ThunderClan so they... they hunted us down. They murdered us in cold blood." Spicetuft's voice became rough. "Then we were in StarClan, where angry ThunderClan cats killed us for ruining our Clan. And now we're here, and we've been living here for a long time."

Cypressfall and Rushingpaw were quiet, staring at the siblings with sympathy. "I'm sor—"

Batchaser cut in. "Enough with the sob story. How'd you kill those wolves?"

The calico turned angrily. "Batchaser—"

"It's okay," Pepperclaw interrupted. "Show them, Spicetuft."

The dark brown tom disappeared into the foliage for a few moments before he reappeared, dragging two weird things. Batchaser shoved his companions out of the way to look, cocking a brow. "What are those?"

"We call them Bow Arches," Pepperclaw explained. "Basically, you strap them over your back, make arrows, and bite down on the clamp. This will fire the arrows. They're quite deadly wolves."

Another stupid, terrible name.

"Whoa! That's so cool!" Rushingpaw exclaimed, running up to see closer. "Can we have some?"

Pepperclaw and Spicetuft exchanged worried glances. "Well, we don't have many. We made these and our backups. We can't give any away. We're sorry."

"So much for that." Batchaser heaved himself to his paws, the black tom's tail whipping behind him. "Cypressfall, Rushingpaw, let's go. I'm ready to get out of here."

Rushingpaw looked suddenly crestfallen.

"He's right," Cypressfall agreed, taking the ShadowClanner by surprise. "We need to leave before any wolves return. Thank you for your time, Pepperclaw and Spicetuft."

"Of course," Cypressfall nodded.

"Do you want to come with us?" Rushingpaw suddenly asked excitedly.

Batchaser whipped to the apprentice. "Rushingpaw, I swear—"

"Don't worry," Pepperclaw replied. "We've survived here long enough that it's become our home. We can't leave now."

"Besides, I don't think either one of us wants to hang around that *ShadowClanner*," Spicetuft growled.

Batchaser shrugged. "Fine with me."

"Let's go," Cypressfall said, pushing past the black tom and leading the way. Rushingpaw was on her heels.

Batchaser stared at the two, turning and beginning to walk off.

But there was a nagging feeling in his stomach. He wanted to ask them something.

"Do you two.. still.. like StarClan?" Batchaser asked without warning, turning to stare at them.

Spicetuft look surprised but then scowled. "No. Why would we ever like them? They did nothing when our former Clanmates murdered us. They don't care about anyone." Pepperclaw silently nodded her head along with her brother's words.

The black tom gulped, nodding and turning to walk off. And those thoughts of StarClan didn't leave his head all day.

A/N: Yeah it's been two weeks but that's what I do when I have no motivation and my grades are failing and I'm grounded. Oh well. Hope you guys enjoyed, please vote and comment your thoughts and may StarClan light your path.🌟

Chapter 18 || The Lost Maze

[image]

The three had been walking for so long Batchaser thought his legs might snap off. His jaws were drawn into a half-snarl, panting heavily and feeling his wounds from the wolves wearing him down heavily. The conversation with those stupid siblings hadn't left his mind all day. They disliked StarClan just as much as he did. So why was he in such a hurry to get back?

An image of Jackalstar flashed into his mind. He snorted to himself, lashing his tail. *I don't care about her. She's a horrible brat, worse than Cypressfall or even Rushingpaw. Besides, it's not like I want to see Shellstar. Maybe this is a bad idea.*

Batchaser did wonder. Was this a bad idea? They'd already gotten this far... it's not like the black tom was going to turn back now. That would be stupid.

The ShadowClanner didn't want to admit it, but he thought it might be because he was lonely by himself. At least in StarClan he had a few cats to interact with. Unlike here, he'd be alone with those stupid wolf-cats if he stayed. So Batchaser wasn't going to do that.

"What's that?"

The curious voice of Rushingpw snapped Batchaser out of his thoughts. His ears angled forward, his brows knitting together as he followed his companions' gazes.

In the distance, something large jutted out of the ground. Batchaser couldn't tell what color it was, but he knew it was most likely the next challenge. The black tom huffed and continued to move on, his tail twitching. "Come on. We're almost there."

Cypressfall looked uncertain but followed anyway, Rushingpaw casting looks around the empty field. *I hope we get there soon. This is*

the most uncomfortable journey I've ever been on. Truly, it was. Cypressfall was insane and Rushingpaw was too quiet for comfort, ever since he'd been killed by Shellstar. Batchaser didn't like it. He missed the old Rushingpaw.

That's idiotic, he scolded himself, shaking his head. *Who cares? I sure don't.*

Batchaser pretty easily convinced himself he didn't give a mouse's tail. But there was still that nagging feeling in the back of his mind that made him sympathize with the small apprentice. He died twice, at such a young age. I mean, I did too, but... I got to live a long life. Rushingpaw didn't.

However, those notions were cut short when Rushingpaw started up his yapping again. The black tom grumbled something under his breath and raised his head, examining the place they were growing closer and closer to.

It was a huge structure, green, leafy walls towering above. Weeds jutted out of the ground, vines entangled around each other as they crawled up the sides.

"Woah!" Rushingpaw continued, eyes wide and bright. "What is this place?!"

"The Lost Maze," Cypressfall murmured.

"What?" Batchaser snapped, whirling around and fixing his piercing gaze on the she-cat.

"The Lost Maze," she repeated, louder this time. "I heard it thrown around every so often, but figured it was a kit's tale. However, this must be it."

The ShadowClanner huffed and turned back around, lashing his tail. "A maze, huh? This is the second challenge?"

"Has to be." Cypressfall took a small step forward, but shrunk back a bit. "Are we sure we want to do this? Cats said strange, dangerous creatures reside inside."

Batchaser rolled his eyes. "I thought you didn't know anyone that made it past the Darkening Forest."

"I don't anymore."

"Mysterious." The ShadowClanner looked down at Rushingpaw with a bored expression. "You ready?"

The small gray tom nodded slightly. "Yes. I just want to get back home."

"You aren't going home, kid," Batchaser said. "StarClan it is."

Rushingpaw looked suddenly sad. "You don't think that, when we get out of here, we'll be reincarnated or something? Or go back to the real world?"

"He's right," Cypressfall added. "Didn't you mention something about StarClan falling apart?"

"No," Batchaser hissed suspiciously. "How did you know that?"

"You weren't listening," the apprentice said in exasperation. "I told her about what happened."

The ShadowClanner growled. "Whatever. Don't expect to be going anywhere other than StarClan."

Rushingpaw was about to snap back but Batchaser was already walking into the maze.

"Hey!" the small tom protested, leaping forward. Cypressfall stayed a few feet behind.

"Here we go," she breathed, eyes wide. "We've made it to the Lost Maze."

A/N: HEY my last update was October 22 so technicalllyyyyyyyy it's only been a little less than two weeks since I've updated. Yay! I'm in class right now and we aren't doing anything so I decided to finish up this chapter. I know this was more filler but I thoroughly enjoy more dialogue so

yeah, that's why I wrote it.

Next chapter, Batchaser is led away from the group by a strange she-cat... or is she really that strange? Let's hope no one pulls a Jack Torrance!

Please vote and comment your thoughts, and may StarClan light your path!🌠

Chapter 19 || Grief

"Batchaser, can't you slow down?"

Cypressfall's sharp mew made the ShadowClanner's pelt prickle more. They'd already reached more dead ends than the actual path, and Batchaser wasn't exactly having fun in this stupid, terrible maze. What a waste of time. Nothing was even stopping them!

Rushingpaw raised his leg, sticking his tongue out. "Now I have mud all over my paws."

"Tough," the black warrior growled, "but you're the one making sure we don't get lost, and that means making a trail with paw print impressions."

Rushingpaw didn't respond. Batchaser didn't care, flicking his ears forward when he heard a soft voice. He stopped suddenly, Cypressfall yowling as she ran into the ShadowClanner.

"Watch where you're going!" she hissed, mismatched eyes narrowed. But Batchaser didn't pay her any mind, his shoulders squaring and his jaw tensing up.

Rushingpaw stared at him, wondering why he hadn't given his usual snappy response. "Batchaser...?"

The black tom saw a bushy tail streak by one of the paths. His heart began to race and the adrenaline coursed through his body and he suddenly felt like his spirit had been lifted.

"Lynxbite...!" His joyful mew broke the silence and he raced forward, the wind flying through his fur. Batchaser's companions called after him but he didn't care. He felt like he was flying.

The ShadowClanner darted through the maze, not bothering to keep track of where he was going. A smile, for almost once in his dreary StarClan life, crossed his muzzle. "Lynxbite!"

"...Batchaser! Stop! You'll get lost..."

The voice faded away as the black tom ran faster, trying to escape the others attempting to restrain him. Batchaser would not be restrained. This might be the only chance he had of seeing his mate.

Things slowed down. His ears pricked, the tom dodging weeds sticking out of the ground. The only noise was the buzzing of locusts.

"Batchaser..." The voice sounded far-off and dreamy. The ShadowClanner held his breath, not wanting to make a sound. She was here. She had to be.

Wait... no. No, this couldn't be real. Sadness tugged at the tom's heart as he realized that. Of course it was fake. Lynxbite hadn't believed in StarClan; she obviously hadn't died there, so it was impossible for her to truly be in the Forgotten Eternity.

Mouse dung, he cursed under his breath, his tail drooping. Batchaser turned to go back the way he came.

But...

It was Lynxbite.

Batchaser froze, stiffening and staring at the beautiful she-cat that had been his mate. The she-cat that had once carried his kits. Before... before she'd died. Stars entwined her pale brown tabby fur, her green eyes soft, yet a blazing defiance flickering in them at the same time.

"Is it really you?" Batchaser managed to splutter out, but it was barely a whisper.

There was a period of silence before she responded. "Yes."

The black tom closed his eyes, exhaling. "Oh, Lynxbite. It's so good—" But when he opened his eyes again, she was gone.

"Lynxbite?" Panic rippled through his chest, but it was soon

replaced with a burning anger. "Hey! Lynxbite! Come back!"

Batchaser bolted after her. It felt like a hot ember was burning in his chest, lapping his emotions in flames and dampening them with the rage that ran deep within his bones.

"LYNXBITE!" he yelled. His short breaths eventually grew into drawn-out pants, which turned into a wheezing and he forced himself to stop. Batchaser's chest felt constricted, like the fire was puffing out more and more smoke until it had drawn out completely.

After the ShadowClanner was able to catch his breath, he raised his head, trying to catch sight of any stray stars that had left Lynxbite's fur. "L-Look," Batchaser called out. "Just come back, one more time. That's all, just *once*. Then... then you can do whatever, it doesn't matter. Just return for the last time. I want to... to see you again."

He waited. And he was patient. Batchaser thought his bargaining might actually work, but after the dragging of many minutes he let out a pitiful sigh. "So. You're not coming. I see how it is."

An empty pit weighed in his stomach, like a stone lodged between the pine trees that wouldn't budge. His eyelids fell, his fur flattening completely and numbness eating away at his body.

He had failed. The one time Batchaser might have been able to see the love of his life, the light in his darkness, she had disappeared, and he had been too weak to catch up to her. He was too weak, too pathetic, too stupid to understand what he had lost. He was a *failure*.

Just when Batchaser had almost lost hope, just when he thought he had failed everything in life... she appeared. And her smile made Batchaser smile, and her everything made him smile, and he rushed over to her, locking her in an embrace and curling his tail around her's. She was real. She was here. That sweet, sweet pine smell still clung to her pelt, causing the black tom to remember his time in ShadowClan, when he'd been alive and when Lynxbite had been alive.

It was truly an amazing feeling.

"Don't worry, my dear..." she murmured, her voice silky, sounding like it was coated in honey. "Things will turn out alright. Never lose hope. Always rely on your heart."

Batchaser closed his eyes. "Thank you, Lynxbite. I love you. I love you so much, and I've missed you more than you even know."

"I know," she said. "I've been with you this whole time. This is the only place I've been able to manifest."

"Thank you," he whispered, joy filling him up from his nose to his tail-tip.

"Of course, Batchaser..."

Her voice faded away, and before he knew it she had disappeared, but her sweet smell was still here, and so were the stars that had been flung off of her pelt, and he remembered her voice and remembered why he'd fallen in love with her.

"I'll miss you, Lynxbite." He smiled. "And I know you'll always be in my heart, no matter how rough things get."

And the acceptance finally filled him through and through. For once Batchaser felt content, excited, happy, *loved*. It had been moons upon moons. Why had he ever let himself slip into who he was now?

However, that feeling didn't last long. Because when he truly realized where he was, what he was doing, and the friends he'd left behind, a breath wrenched from his throat.

"Oh, StarClan. I'm lost."

A/N: AYYYYY it hasn't been that long since I last updated SO I'm really proud of that. And I'm really proud of this chapter in general and ajajsjanak I think it's actually written really well and I'm sorry if I sound annoying for praising myself but look I'm just giving myself a pat on the back for this writing okay it's some of the best I've ever done

Oh also if you didn't realize he basically went through the five stages of grief in a very short amount of time. Denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Go back if you missed it~

Anywho, I hope you enjoyed! Please vote and comment your thoughts, and may StarClan light your path!🌠

Chapter 20 || Memories

[image]

The memories flashing aside the maze were those Batchaser would rather not remember.

His blue eyes strained ahead, his ears pricked and his movements sharp and precise. He didn't want to hear the words he spoke to former Clanmates, or the screeches that wrenched from his throat every night after Lynxbite had died, or *anything* about his living life.

Those were memories better left stored away. But anxiety prickled in his chest and he felt growing fear based on the fact that he had oh-so-stupidly left his companions.

Mouse-brain, he cursed at himself, *you shouldn't have even left*.

Then again, Batchaser didn't regret seeing his mate. Even if she was in another place in the skies, she was still with him, in his heart. That's all that mattered.

Stop being a sappy idiot, the black tom snapped in his head. *Find your*. . . He caught himself on the word "friends." . . . *Travel buddies*.

That sounded a little better.

Lost deep within his thoughts, he didn't even see the blur of movement beside him. His breath caught in his throat when he tripped over a cat. Batchaser hissed and whirled around, claws unsheathing and his tail whipping furiously behind him. He was ready for a fight, until—

"BATCHASER!" Cypressfall yelled, but it wasn't one full of joy. The ShadowClanner hadn't expected it, anyway. No one ever enjoyed seeing him.

Except maybe Jackalstar, but that back-stabbing idiot meant

nothing to Batchaser anymore.

Clearing his throat, the black tom rolled his shoulders forward. "Maybe you should watch where you're going."

Cypressfall's lip curled. "Maybe you should watch where *you're* going!"

Batchaser responded with the roll of his eyes. He turned around, narrowing his blue eyes. "Where's Rushingpaw?"

The calico was quiet for a few moments. "I don't know. He wandered away."

"Wow. Great job at keeping your companions together," the black tom accused.

"Hey!" she spat. "This is your fault, remember? You wandered away and that's when Rushingpaw scampered off like the—"

"Like the little rat he is, I know," Batchaser said in boredom, examining his claws. "Whatever. He'll turn up."

The ShadowClanner turned to continue on until he was stopped by Cypressfall's oddly quiet voice. "You saw it too, didn't you?"

Batchaser turned toward her, his tail flicking back and forth. What did she mean? Had she seen memories of her past as well? What had they been of?

Like he cared. Ripping his gaze away, the black tom idly nodded and went on without another word.

The two continued to walk in silence. There was no scent of Rushingpaw that Batchaser could pick up, but he wasn't too worried, to be honest. He knew the small gray tom would turn up eventually.

Unless he was eaten by some giant plant, oh, I hope. StarClan—AGH! I hate that word. Whatever, it would just be awesome to not have him around right now.

Did Batchaser really believe that? Or had he just convinced himself he truly didn't care?

I don't care.

That couldn't be true.

I. Don't. Care.

"Batchaser? Is that the end of the maze?"

He flicked his head upward, noticing the walls enclosing into a grassy field. The black tom nodded, continuing to walk forward, but Cypressfall wavered.

"What?" he asked, turning around when he realized the calico wasn't following.

She opened and closed her jaws. "I have a feeling that Rushingpaw is still in the maze."

Batchaser huffed. "Wouldn't it be more sensible to look for him out in the *open* field? Not in a stupid enclosed maze when we'll inevitably get lost again?"

"Not if he isn't out there," the she-cat argued. "Maybe we should look harder—"

"Or maybe you should just stop worrying so much," Batchaser interjected.

"Well *someone* has to worry!" Cypressfall protested. "Since you're acting like a stuck-up little kit—"

Batchaser laughed. "Oh, please. Like you didn't act like some insane prophet of the moon when I met you."

"And you're acting like you weren't a scared little baby when I met you," she hissed.

The black tom's neck fur spiked up. "You want to play the insulting game? Okay, how about when—"

A soft cry pierced the air.

Both Batchaser and Cypressfall lifted their heads in confusion, turning to look around at whatever was making the noise.

"Rushingpaw," they both said in unison when the realization hit them, the two running toward the source of the cries.

They ran into a few dead ends, Batchaser's frustration quickly growing. *Ugh! When will we find that stupid brat?*

The black tom backed into another part of the maze, his eyes widening when they landed on Rushingpaw. He was slouched over, his body jerking as sobs echoed from his jaws. The black tom tensed up, raising his tail to halt the calico when she came up behind him.

Batchaser was about to call his name out until the ground rumbled. He and Cypressfall exchanged a glance, mostly out of confusion but with the slightest flicker of worry.

"What... was that?" Cypressfall asked in a wheeze.

The walls of the maze suddenly began to shake. The black tom took a tentative step back, looking around. *Oh, no. No no no no. Is the maze collapsing?*

"Stars," Cypressfall breathed. "It's time oriented."

"What?" Batchaser snapped, whipping his head to her.

"The maze," she began, "we only have a certain amount of time to get out before... before it destroys itself."

The black tom knit his brows together suspiciously. "And how exactly are you sure about this?"

"I always said no cat had gotten farther than the Darkening Forest... but I remember, rarely, the ground would start rumbling lightly. I just imagined it was some small earthquake. But..." She lifted her eyes to the shaking walls. "Clearly I was wrong."

"How would the maze know when to collapse, though?"

Batchaser asked.

...

"The memories," the two said together again.

"Okay, whatever, we can figure this out later," the ShadowClanner concluded. "Right now, we need to get Rushingpaw out of here before we're toppled over by falling rocks."

"Can't argue with that," Cypressfall muttered, following Batchaser closely.

"Hey— Rushingpaw!" The black tom's bark was rough and edged with venom. When the gray tom didn't respond, Batchaser realized maybe a... less harsh tone would be more approachable. By the look on the calico's face, she seemed to agree.

"Uh— Uh... Rushingpaw? Hey, buddy?" he began, taking a small step forward.

Stars, I am totally the wrong cat for this. He paused. *Stars. I like that. It's a better alternative than StarClan. I guess I can thank the crazy she-cat for that one.*

"Less thinking, more moving!" Cypressfall hissed when the ground shuddered again.

Batchaser growled something under his breath and flicked his tail back and forth, trying to hide his sympathy with annoyance. It's what he did best. Make cats feel terrible.

What a reassuring thought.

Sighing, Batchaser wrapped his tail around the small tom's body. Rushingpaw reacted with a small flinch, but said nothing more. "Rushingpaw? Hey, Rushingpaw. Look, err— we kind of need to get out of here or it could lead to a certain death. We don't really know where you go when you die for the third time but, uh, can we go? Please? I really don't want to be buried alive."

The ShadowClanner was about to speak again when there was a

long period of silence, until the apprentice finally said something.

"Whisperkit..." he whispered. "A-And Bushkit... my parents... RiverClan... I left them. I l-left them behind in ruins."

Batchaser scowled. "Don't be stupid. Blaming yourself for a death you couldn't control is non-sensible."

"I drowned," Rushingpaw blurted out. "I saw my death. Whisperkit was there... we snuck out, we were playing by the river."

"'*We*'? You were an apprentice. Why would you need to sneak out?" Batchaser inquired. Cypressfall shot him a look that said "hurry up or I'm going to claw your pelt off, unless I die instead because of your slow tail."

Rushingpaw didn't reply to the question. He only hesitated and continued. "So... so then I fell in. A RiverClan cat, *drowning* in the river. How can I ever forgive myself for being such a failure?"

"Rushingpaw, you dying wasn't your fault," Batchaser said, his eyes flashing. "I was murdered. You think I don't want to get my claws on that mouse-brained, good for nothing, idiotic—" Cypressfall cleared her throat impatiently, "—uh, whatever, but I felt terrible when I found out about my death. You're young. You shouldn't have to feel that way. If you want to blame anyone, blame your mentor for not teaching you to swim sooner."

That didn't seem to give the small tom ease, but his shoulders dropped and it felt like his body was a feather. *Finally!* Batchaser grabbed Rushingpaw's scruff and whirled around, pummeling toward the exit of the maze and gasping as the walls began to crack into pieces behind them. One nearly smashed into the ShadowClanner, but he swerved around it and managed to make it to the clearing. Cypressfall was there as well, the small gray tom secured safely in Batchaser's jaws.

Gasping for air, the black tom turned his head and watched the maze completely destroy itself. He dropped Rushingpaw, staggering to his paws and making sure the calico wasn't hurt.

"Is everyone okay?" Batchaser asked, eyes flickering to his companions.

"Just dandy, thanks," Cypressfall groaned. Rushingpaw didn't respond.

Batchaser raised his blue eyes to what was in front of them. Another forest spread out, but it resembled ThunderClan's territory more than anything. Definitely not as scary as the Darkening Forest.

"Well..." Batchaser drew himself forward, his ears pricking. "Let's get on with this quest."

A/N: So some direct inspiration for this chapter was Don't Leave Me Now by Pink Floyd and Empty Spaces by Pink Floyd (both from their album The Wall, which I've been obsessed with lately). Give em a listen while you read if you want. The picture attached is some art of Batchaser! (not by me)

Anywho, next chapter wait to see some really weird things go down. Souls and all that good stuff.

Thank ya all reading! Please vote and comment your thoughts, and may StarClan light your path🌟

Chapter 21 || Drifting Souls

The three had been walking silently for a long while.

The maze had been left far behind, a moor stretching out in front of the cats, clumps of heather scattered in dips and a few trees sprouting out of the ground here and there. Straining his eyes, Batchaser was able to make out a forest farther away, the oak trees wavering under the crimson sky.

"I'm guessing that's whatever is next, since nothing has come up since the maze..." the black tom muttered, blue eyes flickering to the other two.

Cypressfall shrugged. "Maybe." Her eyes looked troubled and far-off, Batchaser noticed, but he didn't press.

Rushingpaw's head hung a little lower than usual, too. "I just want to get out of here.."

"We've probably gotten farther than any other cat," Batchaser mused, trying to lighten the mood in any way possible. He was about to rip his fur out from the deafening, awkward silence.

Cypressfall tipped her head. "Maybe."

"Is that all you say?" The ShadowClanner scowled.

"I just... I don't know.." Her voice trailed off and Batchaser fixed her with a pointed stare. She continued a few moments later, standing still. Rushingpaw hardly seemed to notice. "I saw so much in the maze. It makes me wonder if... if going on is worth it. Or if I even deserve it."

"You're doing this for yourself and no one else," Batchaser pointed out, swishing his tail. "Why does it matter if it doesnt affect anyone else?"

"But it *does*!" Her voice rose into a slight wail. This time the

apprentice stopped, looking back with worry and confusion. "I took my sister's mate... he wasn't even part of ThunderClan.."

Batchaser grunted. "Forbidden love is overrated."

"I *stole* him from her," she choked. "And then Icestar... we fought..."

"You didn't *steal* anyone. If this forbidden love chose you over your sister then it's their fault, not your's." Batchaser shrugged. "And if Icestar couldn't forgive you for that, then what kind of sister is she?"

"I had the kits she was meant to have..." the calico whispered.

"Did they do good in their lives?" Rushingpaw suddenly asked, his voice soft and gruff with internal pain. Batchaser turned his muzzle toward the gray apprentice.

"Yes." Cypressfall smiled softly.

"Then it was destined to happen," Rushingpaw murmured, smiling at the she-cat. He rested his tail on her shoulder and the two went on. Frowning, forcing his face into a scowl to hide his slight worry, Batchaser quickly caught up.

"So, are we going there next?" he asked, pointing with his tail toward the towering trees farther off. Cypressfall twitched her ear in recognition to hearing his voice.

"I'm guessing, I haven't seen anything else since the maze collapsed. I figured the forest would be the next step to the journey." She eyed Batchaser. "What do you think?"

The ShadowClanner shrugged. "I guess. Let's just hope there aren't any wolves. I really would rather not have my fur torn out this time..."

"You can say that again," Rushingpaw muttered under his breath. The young cat's ears suddenly pricked and he pointed excitedly toward the treeline, oaks shadowing whatever was inside. Batchaser was sure this was just a trick on sore eyes. "Look! Lights! Do you see

that?"

Batchaser did see the faint glow of a yellow orb, drifting out of the woods before slipping back inside and disappearing into the shadows, a flicker of light in the darkness. It reminded Batchaser of himself. Always mean and irritable, swallowed by darkness, only a sliver of light forcing its way out from time to time... He shook his head and twitched his tail, now was the time to think about the quest, not himself.

Before Batchaser could say anything else, Cypressfall and Rushingpaw were already running toward the towering oaks. The ShadowClanner's eyes narrowed and he pounded after them, his paws kicking up tufts of grass that swept into the air behind him. The two disappeared into the foliage and Batchaser hesitated before diving forward, bramble clawing at his face. He hissed and flicked the swaths away, feeling thorns prickle his skin and dribble blood down his cheeks. He wiped the crimson liquid away and muttered angrily as he came crashing out of the clearing. Brows furrowed, Batchaser was about to scold the two until there was a sight before him he'd never seen before.

Orbs. Orbs of all shapes and colored drifted around the clearing, swooping high and low to the ground, curving around each other and some circling the group. They emitted a light glow, different colors burning from the inside and lighting up the place. Batchaser, intrigued, stepped forward toward a red one. It stopped and his heart lurched as he saw what was inside.

A white tom, fangs drawn into a snarl as he leaped at a tabby she-cat. Blood, darkness, anger... Batchaser could almost feel it pulsing through his claws. He turned away and noticed a green one floating forward. Looking into the depths of this orb, he saw a sleek silver she-cat surrounded by pine trees, eyes wide with fear and her fur on end. Shadows leapt out of the undergrowth and tackled her to the ground, slitting open her throat as her petrified screams filled the air. Blood, darkness, fear.

Batchaser knew what this was. "Souls," he whispered.

"Hm?" Rushingpaw tipped his head toward the black tom.

"Souls?"

"Yes... my mate always loved talking about souls.. how the different colors showed who cats are. She said my soul was orange. Fiery and full of spirit." His heart wrenched in his chest as grief nearly toppled him to the ground. "I think that's what these are. They're the souls of cats, stuck in this forest clearing, only the memory letting them live on as orbs. They're drifting souls."

Rushingpaw's eyes grew soft. "I... didn't know you had a mate... what.. what happened to her?"

Batchaser let the sadness die away and set his jaw in a straight line, narrowing his eyes. "Don't bother asking."

"I see it now!" Cypressfall jerked her head back, eyes sparkling with excitement. "They're the color of souls!"

"A little late.." Batchaser muttered.

"Don't you get it?!" She looked around wildly. "We have to take them! We need to get them back to their bodies! This is the next task!"

In a matter of seconds, Rushingpaw and Cypressfall had begun gathering the orbs in their paws. Batchaser's eyes widened and he waved his paws in front of him. "Woah woah woah! We can't get sidetracked now, we're supposed to be leaving as soon as possible, not staying for longer!"

Cypressfall shook her head. "No! I know this is right! I can feel it."

"I think I can too!" Rushingpaw exclaimed.

Batchaser growler. Was he the only sane one here? This had to stop! It would only take longer for them to escape. So, bushing out his fur to appear larger and scarier, the ShadowClanner said, "How about-"

Then, out of the corner of Batchaser's eye, before he could do anything to control the situation, leapt a shadowy creature. And it

was aiming straight for Rushingpaw.

A/N: o cliffhanger sorry haha ;)

Anyway yeah it's been a while sorry. Finals and anxiety and no motivation even though all the plans are finished for this book I'm just great aren't I

I'm having a heartburn problem right now so. That also sucks and makes it harder to write. Oh well.
Hope you guys enjoyed, please vote and comment your thoughts and may StarClan light your path✨

Chapter 22 || Dead Isn't Dead

Batchaser didn't have even a moment's time to react until the creature had Rushingpaw locked beneath its claws. It snapped at the apprentice, snarling as spit flew from its lips, its almost decaying gray fur splitting open cracks in its body. Batchaser's eyes widened in horror and panic tightened his chest but he threw himself forward, slamming his front paws into the creature and rolling on the ground with it.

The ShadowClanner pinned it down with his paws, staring into its lifeless gray eyes that sparked hunger and fear. Batchaser's claws trembled as he was caught in a trance until Cypressfall dragged the black tom off of the creature, slitting open its throat. The decaying creature halted and staggered forward, body spasming as it tumbled to the ground.

Batchaser has expected a pool of blood to leak around the creature, but instead there was nothing. He stepped forward tentatively, rolling the creature over and examining its features. The slit throat was like a gaping hole in the middle of its throat, Batchaser able to see the darkness of its insides.

He closed his eyes and drew back, disgust crawling up his throat. He let out a shaky breath and looked over toward Rushingpaw, who was shaking madly as Cypressfall wrapped her tail around his body and whispered motherly things.

Turning his attention back toward the deceased... or deceased-again creature, Batchaser was finally able to determine what it was. The rotting corpse of a smudged silver cat, once dead but alive again. It didn't make sense, but he knew who this feline was.

"This is the cat I saw in one of the orbs," Batchaser said. "The she-cat, surrounded by fear as she was murdered by a group of other cats..." His gaze fell toward her throat. "She must've died here. That's what the cats that attacked her were. It's why she was so afraid... and then her fear became an orb, and now she's trapped

here like the rest of them."

"So... dead isn't dead, then?" Cypressfall grumbled.

"Apparently not." His tail waved behind him, eyes serious. "Living but dead cats... whatever they are, they don't bleed and are very vicious. We need to get out of here, now."

"Fine by me." The calico led Rushingpaw away from the corpse, Batchaser shooting looks back behind them. He heard the rustle of leaves and his ears pricked, his heart beating rapidly in his chest. *No. No. I will not be afraid. I have to protect my friends.*

Batchaser hadn't though of Rushingpaw and Cypressfall as friends much before. But after what they'd been through, after the ShadowClanner had helped Rushingpaw into StarClan, after they'd teamed up with Cypressfall to escape the Forgotten Eternity... it seemed apparent they weren't just acquaintances. Batchaser would defend their lives and they would do the same for him.

That didn't calm him down nearly enough when a low, bone-chilling moan echoed through the forest. Batchaser froze, heart pounding in his ears as he turned around. He stopped breathing as a hoard of dead-but-alive cats tumbled after the group, mouths gaping horridly, blood smeared over their bodies and some with decaying limbs.

Stars. We have to get out of here!

"MOVE!" Without even thinking twice, Batchaser whipped around and shoved Rushingpaw forward. Cypressfall hissed as she staggered to the nettle-covered floor bur was back on her paws, bolting with the gray apprentice close behind. The ShadowClanner followed, the wind blowing his whiskers back and whipping through his fur. The groans of the dead-but-alive cats grew louder and Batchaser's fur spiked. They wouldn't be able to escape!

Thinking fast, he craned his head up toward one of the trees and barked the order: "CLIMB THE TREES! NOW!"

Hopefully they understood. Trembling, Batchaser hooked his

dirt-covered claws into the bark and hoisted himself upward. Fear and adrenaline pushed him forward and he curled his tail close to his body, the dead-but-alive cats attempting to climb but failing.

He gasped heavily, his breath coming out in pants every so often and his ears twitching with every snap of a twig. Batchaser tossed his head over his shoulder to make sure Cypressfall and Rushingpaw were okay, which, thankfully, they were.

Letting himself suck in oxygen, the black tom's fur eventually began to smooth as the dead-but-alive cats sort of gave up and stumbled away, inevitably looking for more prey to munch on. He waited for what seemed like hours until he hopped to the ground, the ShadowClanner watching his two friends do the same. He sighed contently, about to open his mouth to speak until an angry hiss cut him off.

"What in StarClan's name was that?!"

A/N: kind of a short chapter, sorry bout that but yeah. Some zombified cats cause it was one of the only other ideas I had for the third challenge but AYYY yeah I think it went okay

Anywho next chapter get ready for some fighting because apparently these three can't stay positive about anything or be nice to each other oop

Please vote and comment your thoughts, and may StarClan light your path!✨

Chapter 23 || Split

"What are you on about?" Batchaser snapped back, eyeing Cypressfall as he scratched his ear with his back leg. His claws flexed subconsciously and the tom scowled. He'd just saved them and now the stupid she-cat seriously wanted to argue? What a pest!

"You're such a control freak!" the calico snarled, spit flying from her lips. Batchaser grimaced and wiped some from his fur, curling his lip at her continuation of words. "We would've been able to proceed just fine had you not been all over the place! Go here! Go there! *Stars*, you're impossibly impossible!"

Batchaser snorted, unaffected by the yelling. He looked toward the small gray apprentice. "What do you think, Rushingpaw? Was I really so crazy?"

The little tom shuffled his paws, head dipping toward his paws. Batchaser realized this was a *Yes* in Rushingpaw language and growled. "WHAT?! I saved your life, you ungrateful furball!"

"*He's* ungrateful? You're the one that's been making this the worst journey of all time!" Cypressfall squared the black tom up, eyes glittering with fire. "No wonder you were sent to the Forgotten Eternity. How could anyone like you?"

Batchaser's heart hurt slightly from that statement but he pushed it away, furrowing his brows. "Oh, come *on*, darling, you think I care what someone else thinks about me?" He scowled and rolled his eyes.

"I think you do on the inside," Cypressfall said. "You just don't show it. Maybe if you stopped masking your emotions and interacted with others like a real cat then you wouldn't be so disliked!"

"Oh, mouse*dung*!" He rose to his full height, glaring down at her. "The only reason I'm here in the first place is because StarClan is

full of a bunch of self-entitled brats that think they know everything about everything!" His paws flew up in exasperation. "What am I supposed to do about that? Play along? No, I refuse."

"Clearly," she laughed cruelly. "I think your rebellion against authority is the reason you were killed in the first place."

Batchaser flexed his claws, fury throbbing through his chest. He felt a fireball forming but quenched it; the only hint of his true anger was the agitated twitch of his tail. *She's leading me on. Is this her way of getting close to me?* He paused. *Of course. If Cypressfall pretends to assume then she thinks I'm going to tell her how I really died. Well, tough luck, kitty! I know all your manipulative tactics!*

Well...because I've used them all as well..

"Whatever," he huffed, sitting down. "If you're so against my way of doing things why don't you leave? Rushingpaw can come with me, we don't need you on this trip anyway."

Cypressfall's lack of finding hurt in those words really drove Batchaser crazy.

"OH! Do you think *Rushingpaw* likes you? Of course, he died a second time for you, but that's only because you showed one last shred of emotions before." Batchaser opened his mouth to respond but was cut off. "Yeah, he told me everything. You meeting him? The fake prophecy? All your buddies and Shellstar?" The ShadowClanner's claws tore at the decaying grass under their paws. "Yeah. So I sort of know you, Batchaser. And I know Rushingpaw. *No. One. Likes. You*!"

Batchaser flinched, turning toward Rushingpaw, his fury brimming. "Is this true?"

Rushingpaw's ears flicked back, his eyes wide. "N-No, Batchaser, I swear I still—"

"NO! I've lost patience with you," the black tom hissed. "I tried to help you when I met you and I've been trying to help you now. And what do you do? Gossip about me behind my back? Even I wouldn't

stoop that low!" Rushingpaw's eyes pooled with tears.

Batchaser shook with anger, his paws trembling. "Leave, then. If you really don't like me then go! Does it look like I have a problem? Is anyone holding you back? No! I can make this journey on my own!"

Rushingpaw shrunk back. "Pl-Please Batchaser—"

"I don't want to hear it." He chuckled darkly. "Go on ahead. I'll find you later, maybe not. I valued our friendship but I realize that my feelings haven't been returned. You're just like Jackalstar—a backstabber. Now GO!"

Rushingpaw cried. Batchaser glared at the unemotional Cypressfall, turning his back to the two cats he'd considered friends and stalked through the foliage, shadows clouding his heart.

If they don't want to be around me then that's fine. I'm fine. I don't care! I don't care at all! Nope, not one bit.

I swear I don't care..

A/N: woaj how long has it been??? Y'all better be excited for this chapter BECAUSE I SURE AS HELL AM!!!

I actually enjoyed writing this! A little angst because hey, why not right? Tell me what your favorite chapter has been so far! Favorite character? Event? I'd love to hear your feedback! Theories are AWESOME too!! What do you think is gonna later??? Did you spot any foreshadowing?? GO CRAZY!!

In the next chapter we have a lonesome Batchaser wandering the forest for escape...what will happen then?

STAY TUNED!! Love y'all and hope you enjoyed! Please vote and comment your thoughts, and may StarClan light your path!!🌠

Chapter 24 || Visiting Dreams

"Who needs them, anyway? Not me! Nope, definitely not me!"

The black tom shouldered his way through the foliage, tall decaying leaves smacking him in the nose. Batchaser hissed and shoved them out of the way, his tail bristling angrily. Craning his head up to the dark red sky, the ShadowClanner's eyes slightly narrowed. *How am I gonna find my way out of this place?*

Despite how angry he was at Cypressfall and Rushingpaw, Batchaser had to admit that the two had been a useful addition to his team. Rushingpaw's good hearing and Cypressfall's knowledge and excellent tracking skills had actually really helped the group on the journey—but now that they were split? The black tom wasn't sure he'd ever find his way out of this stupid forest.

Filled with very dead-dead-dead hungry cats, might I add. Ugh, StarClan makes everything so confusing—I've been killed twice yet I'm still not dead. What kind of logic is that*?*

Huffing, Batchaser pricked his ears, hearing a shuffling sound nearby. *Prey? I hardly forgot how hungry I was—I don't think I've eaten this whole trip . . .*

His tail flicked with confusion. Now that he thought about it, he *hadn't* eaten a single scrap of fresh kill—was it just the Forgotten Eternity? Did cats not go hungry here?

Unless I'm the prey.

Gulping, Batchaser spotted a large oak tree in the distance. Picking up his pace, fear carrying his paws onward, the tom leapt up and scrambled to the lowest branch, claws hooking into the bark as he heaved himself up another two or three levels. Humming silently, the ShadowClanner wove his way through hanging tendrils and found himself on a sprawling nest-like padding of leaves. His heart rate decreased and the tom sighed, exhaustion tugging at his

mind.

I'll continue on tomorrow . . .

Batchaser curled up on the sturdy branches and let his eyes crack open to look at the starless sky.

Will I ever be able to make it back home?

⋆⋆⋆

When Batchaser opened his eyes, he expected to be back in the Forgotten Eternity. However, his fur ruffled as a soft breeze blew by, and the ShadowClanner realized that the sky was a gentle shade of blue. Did that mean—?

"Hello?" Batchaser's ears swiveled to the empty meadow behind him, tulips kissing his paws. Growling, the black tom slashed them, bounding down the hill and examining his surroundings. Who had spoken? That voice . . . It sounded so familiar.

"Is uh. Anyone here?" Batchaser's heart lurched when he recognized the tone.

Only a ThunderClanner would be stupid enough to call out for someone in a dream.

Batchaser sprinted up another hill, his feet rooted to the ground. He truly hadn't expected to actually see her—the ShadowClanner figured it was some hallucination in this already dumb dream. But no; here she was, brown and white woven pelt standing out against the green grass below. Her blue eyes scanned around the place until they landed on Batchaser.

"BATCHASER!" Jackalstar propelled herself forward and into the tom's chest. He gasped and staggered back, falling on his back with the leader on his belly. His ears flicked back and he looked away.

"Um. This is kind of awkward."

"Oh." Scrambling off of the tom, Jackalstar bounced on her toes like an excited little kit. Despite everything that had happened,

Batchaser was happy to see her. He truly had missed the ThunderClanner. "So you're alive? I . . . I wasn't sure whether or not you were still in the Forgotten Eternity."

The black tom sat down, blinking at her. "Yup. Still here, alone right now . . . How were you able to contact me?"

Jackalstar looked a little embarrassed. "I pulled a you."

". . . And that means?"

"Some older StarClan leaders closed off the border to the Star-lit Pool," she sighed. "I fed one poppy seeds from a finch and snuck past. I wanted to see if I could contact a living cat, but wasn't given the option to choose. Instead, I was sent here, but I'm actually quite happy about that."

Batchaser rolled his eyes. "Happy to see me? I'm surprised, especially after you decided I was better being used than an actual friend."

Jackalstar flinched. "Batchaser, I—"

"It's whatever," Batchaser huffed, paws shuffling. "I was a foxheart to you and honestly deserved that. Don't dwell on it too much. I'm escaping from here soon, anyway."

The she-cat looked surprised. "You don't need me to come save your tail?"

Batchaser scrunched up his nose. "Not for now, at least." He paused, gaze darkening. "How is StarClan? I don't imagine this is what it actually looks like."

Jackalstar instantly became stiff, her playful mood dwindling to specks of nothingness. "Follow me," she murmured, turning tail and leading him away from the field.

They walked for a while until the sky seemed to split in two. Batchaser froze, pieces of the blue sky falling away, dark storm clouds bubbling on the horizon. The fields were littered with specks of dead grass, gray sheets of rain pelting down on the rotting trees

ahead. The black tom couldn't move; shock pulsed through him like an infected wound. *Is this really what StarClan looks like now? Is this the destruction I caused?*

Guilt twisting his heart, Batchaser turned away, hurt spiraling through his chest like a hurricane. "This is all my fault," he whispered, his voice breaking.

Jackalstar, realizing her friend's overcoming sadness, pushed her muzzle into his flank. "It's okay," she whispered, voice soft. "We're going to fix this, right? Once we get you out of that StarClan-forsaken place then all will be okay. We'll get the Clans to see some sense." She paused. "Even if this is sort of your fault."

Comforting as always. Snorting, Batchaser pushed distance between the two, his pelt ruffling awkwardly. *I don't like being that close to Jackalstar. Not after she betrayed me like that*. Biting back bitterness, the black tom's tail flicked as the world around him began to grow blurry. "I suppose this means our dream is ending," he murmured.

Jackalstar seemed to notice the fading of light, her eyes widening. "No! You can't leave yet! We still have things to speak of!"

"Calm down," he huffed, claws ticking. "We'll see each other again soon. Hopefully I'll be out of this dreadful place in a few days and return to StarClan." His eyes darkened. "Then we'll fix this mess."

Jackalstar nodded, frozen as stone. "See you, Batchaser."

"See ya."

A/N: WOW an update so soon??? Crazy right??? HAHAHAH. I'm actually quite happy with this chapter and my newfound motivation...so get ready for more!

Next chapter we have Batchaser running into some trouble and finding the next obstacle of the Forgotten Eternity...what could it be???

Thanks for reading, loves! Please vote and comment your thoughts, and may StarClan light your path! 🔥

Chapter 25 || Blood River

[image]

When he jerked awake from the dream, Batchaser knew he needed to continue on and finish the last two tasks of this stupid mission.

The black tom hooked his claws into the bark, clawing down the trunk and hopping lightly on the dead grass beneath him. Batchaser trampled over weeds, ducking under swaths of leaves and shifting in and out between brambles. He twitched an ear, blue eyes narrowing slightly. The ShadowClanner had become accustomed to the lighter and darker shades of red in the sky, indicating whether it was day or night. Right now, the crimson was its lightest tint; it must've been early.

At least I can predict something *in this horrible place.*

Huffing, Batchaser continued on for a while, silently confined to the thoughts of his own mind as he wandered around aimlessly. His paws often lead him in circles, making Batchaser angry and annoyed, but he felt a flutter of hope when the trees began to spread out and the grass grew taller below his feet.

Does this mean I'm almost out? I wonder if Cypressfall and Rushingpaw are out of the forest already as well. The black tom then scowled and shook his head. *What does it matter though? Not like they care about me.... and I don't care about them!*

Gaze darkening, he pressed on and examined his surroundings carefully. The crack of a twig halted him in his tracks, his head swiveling to the side from reflex. Nothing.

Okay...not creepy at all...

Huffing, Batchaser turned to continue but stopped when the gurgling of a river filled his ears. Eyes widening, excitement prickling trough his pelt, the ShadowClanner began to sprint toward the noise.

A river! Is this the next task?

When Batchaser threw himself through entangled traps of thickets and stuck his head out the other side, every single bone in his body seemed to freeze. Horror trickled into his deep blue gaze and he let out a startled gasp, staggering forward on his paws, darkness surrounding his vision.

A blood river. The disgusting, thick, crimson liquid rapidly flew by, bubbles emerging at the surface, deepened streaks of red coursing through like glimpses of fish. Batchaser was horrified. He couldn't move; his paws were rooted in place, his muscles were stiff, and the horrible feeling creeping into his mind didn't calm the storm.

Is this how much bloodshed I've cause based on that prophecy?

Batchaser didn't have time to dwell on grief. A dark mass tangled itself in the black tom's grip and he screeched in shock, fur on end. What was even more terrifying was to claw at a rotting gray body, glassy white eyes glaring back at him with the ferocity of a venomous snake. Long, pointed fangs snapped at his face and Batchaser pulled back just in time, yelping when a whisker was ripped off of his muzzle. *No! Another dead-dead-dead cat! Are you kidding me?? I don't have time for this right now!*

The ShadowClanner was thrown off his paws and shook with terror when the two cats (neither truly living) tumbled into the red abyss below. Batchaser screamed with fear when the creature bit into his shoulder, metal flooding into his jaws and seeping into his lungs. The black tom gagged and outstretched his claws toward the surface, his body flying with the rapids. He attempted to swim but the disgust crawling up his throat was more than he could handle. He threw up slightly, eyes stinging madly from the blood. The dead-dead-dead cat was swept away from Batchaser, but that was about the only good thing right now.

He wasn't sure he could make it right now. Shadows pressed at the edges of his mind and threatened to tear apart any sanity left inside his soul. *...no! I can't become one of those zombified cats! I have to prove everyone wrong... I'm not a bad cat... I swear..! I'M NOT!*

Determination caused adrenaline to filter through his veins. Despite the grossness of this whole ordeal, Batchaser managed to grip the bottom of the shallow river and propelled himself upwards, flying out of the blood and gripping onto a nearby rock. Gasping for air, Batchaser scrabbled onto land and immediately hunched over, heaving out what seemed to be buckets of crimson liquid. He threw up more, coughing and choking on the horrible taste. *This was absolutely* terrible*!*

"Agh..." he spluttered out, his lip shaking as he flattened himself to the ground. Overwhelmed by the shock, Batchaser let the trembling through his limbs subside and curled into a ball, his tail wrapping tightly around his body for much-needed warmth.

"StarClan. You look absolutely *pathetic*."

Batchaser jumped to his paws, claws flashing out before he even had time to think. He stopped, eyes widening to see the cats before him. A familiar white-and-brown pelt sloshed around through his mind and he smiled widely. "Jackalstar!"

Wow! They're all here! Jackalstar and Galewhisker....! And who is that? Oh, yes, that's...

Oh, stars.

Oh, stars no, this can't be happening.

Dear StarClan please don't do this to me.

Jackalstar and Galewhisker exchanged a nervous glance and stepped out of the way, revealing a bulky white tom with black stripes crossing down his flanks. His eyes glinted against his odd fur coloring and Batchaser couldn't help but completely freezing up, anger and hurt and despair flickering a switch in his mind.

Shellstar...

A/N: WOW LOTS OF UPDATES! Yes yes...a little cliffhanger eh? How did the three of them get here, though?? Well, find out next chapter! Where even reunites! But then again not everyone is so happy about it...

Thank you all for 1.8k—I just hit this phenomenal number and...wow. I'm seriously blown away. You all are the reason I'm inspired to write this book and my other stories, and I'm so grateful y'all have stuck it out with me for so long... I really hope it's been worth it! This means the world!

Anwho, thanks again, and I hope you enjoyed! Please vote and comment your thoughts, and may StarClan light your path🌈

Chapter 26 || Reunion

"What in StarClan's name is he doing here?" Batchaser hissed, hackles rising, claws extending outwards as he shook with rage. The black and white tom shuffled his paws anxiously, head bowed with what looked like guilt.

I don't care. That foxheart killed me. Why should I forgive him?!

Jackalstar looked at Shellstar expectantly, curling her lips and smacking his face harshly. "Tell him, mousebrain!" she growled. "Or are you too scared now? You literally practiced this on our way to the Star-lit Pool fifty thousand times!"

"Probably about four," Galewhisker corrected, earning him a glare from Jackalstar.

Shellstar was quiet for a few more moments before he looked up at Batchaser, eyes reflecting kit-like fear. *He's scared of being rejected.* Narrowing his eyes slightly, the black tom huffed and turned his head away. "Well, he clearly can't explain to me—"

"*I'm sorry*!" Shellstar wailed, a heartbroken cry wrenching from his throat. Batchaser cocked a brow at him. "I didn't mean to! I... I mean, I did...! But...it was a mistake. I made a mistake, like-like you made a mistake!"

"*Oh*, of course, blow this back on me!" the ShadowClanner snarled, neck fur bristling. "Because you can't truly apologize without making yourself feel better, right? At least I didn't kill a cat with my own claws! You idiot!" He lunged forward and sunk his thorn-sharp talons into Shellstar's chest, slamming him to the dusty ground with a fierce growl.

"*OKAY!* I really am sorry!" Shellstar covered his face with his paws, anticipating being struck. "I-I'm a horrible excuse for a feline and I know that now! I received my fair punishment, okay? Does that make you feel any better??"

Batchaser knew the WindClan leader wasn't exactly the best with showing true emotions, but even *he* could tell Shellstar was truly being genuine. That caused his heart to almost stop, his tail flicking wildly behind him. *Someone actually feels guilt for hurting me?* Batchaser though back to Lynxbite, a frown tugging at the edges of his lips. *I know* she *never cared.*

Shaking away the memories, Batchaser snorted and jumped off of the leader. "Fine. I accept your apology."

Shellstar jerked upwards, eyes wide. "Really?"

Batchaser glared at him. "Would you rather I don't?"

That shut the stupid leader up.

"So," Batchaser continued after a moment of silence, examining his claws. "What brings my three best buddies to The Forgotten Eternity?"

"Oh. Right." Jackalstar leapt to her paws and paced around the other three cats. "Well, you know how we talked about that stuff last night?" Batchaser nodded. "Okay, so after all of that I gathered up Galewhisker and Shellstar to the Star-lit Pool to talk to you more in-depth. But then... well, when we were teleported inside, we figured you'd be having another dream, right? Turns out you weren't but you connecting with me left the Forgotten Eternity open to outsiders... we were dropped off a ways away from you and started looking. Then Galewhisker—observant as ever—noticed your pathetic tail struggling in that absolutely *disgusting* river! So now here we are!" A moment of silence passed. "....yaaaay..?"

"I guess that makes sense," the black tom said with a shrug.

"Jackalstar." Galewhisker nudged the she-cat. "Are you going to tell him about..."

The ThunderClan leader's eyes glazed over with pain and she nodded slowly. "Right... um, Batchaser, after you were killed a few days ago, Rushingpaw.." Her voice shook and Shellstar's ears flattened with shame. "Rushingpaw attacked Shellstar with the rest

of us... he snapped the little tom's neck and he died as well. Do you... do you know where he is...? Did he make it here or...or is the runt gone?"

"I truly do feel sorry for that," Shellstar murmured, defeated.

Batchaser tensed up, the muscles inside his body going stiff. He'd momentarily forgotten about Rushingpaw and Cypressfall. *I doubt they're sharing any good memories about me. They both hate my guts*.

"Yeah," he finally spluttered out, earning surprised looks from the other three. "He was here with me. We met another sort of crazy she-cat named Cypressfall... she helped us on our journey but, uh, before I talked to you—" He motioned toward Jackalstar, "—we sort of split up after an argument. I'm not sure where they are, but I'm pretty sure they hate me."

"We don't hate you, Batchaser...!"

All four cats whipped around, pelts on end and ruffling with fear. Batchaser's eyes widened when he saw the familiar gray-blue shape of little Rushingpaw, and Cypressfall's lithe body, along with her cold mismatched eyes... he froze, paws shaking as his two former companions ran up to the others. Cypressfall held back, looking wary of meeting strangers.

Before Rushingpaw could tackle Batchaser in a hug, he squealed with terror at the sight of Shellstar. The apprentice turned tail and hid behind Cypressfall, who narrowed her eyes at the black and white tom. "Um. Who exactly are you all?"

"These are my.... *friends*," Batchaser snorted, waving his paw toward the four felines. "Apparently they just made it in here. Jackalstar, Galewhisker, and... Shellstar."

"I really am sorry," Shellstar sighed, eyeing Rushingpaw with a guilty look. "I was so angry... I... I hardly knew what I was doing..."

The calico's eyes widened. "You're the one that killed Rushingpaw for the second time? He's just a *kit*!"

"Apprentice..." the small gray tom muttered, but looked up at

Shellstar with wide eyes. "Are you... are you sure you feel sorry? I could forgive you... I'm glad I got to meet Cypressfall through all of this... but it was still hard, being killed ruthlessly.."

"I know," the WindClan leader choked. "I truly feel horrible. Please forgive me."

"Okay..." Rushingpaw smiled up softly at Shellstar.

"Alright, enough reunion time, shall we get going?" All eyes turned to Batchaser and he met their gazes, shrugging. "What? I'm ready to get out of this place!"

A/N: Hmm now that the gang's all together what do you think is gonna happen? I'd love to hear all y'alls theories!!! There will be 60+ chapters so gotta fill it in somehow... but with what??? :ooo

Anyway, next chapter we have the next stage and we reach the end of the Forgotten Eternity... but somewhere much worse lies ahead!

Thank you all for reading! Please vote and comment your thoughts, and may StarClan light your path! 🔥

Chapter 27 || Sinkholes

"I didn't expect the trek to be this long."

"This wasn't even a quarter of what *we* had to go through," Batchaser mumbled, tail lashing back and forth like an angry adder. He already regretted letting the three stooges come along. This whole journey was turning even more sour than before, and Batchaser didn't particularly want to keep that bitter taste in his mouth.

Jackalstar huffed, splotch-ridden pelt ruffling through the wind. "Well, whatever. My legs hurt and I'm bored with you idiots."

"Are you talking about yourself?" the black tom snapped, sniffing around a particularly deep trench they stumbled across. *Hmm. Shallower than the one Rushingpaw nearly fell into earlier. Idiotic little weasel.*

Jackalstar stopped, thinking about his words for a moment until they finally hit. "Hey! Wait!"

The ShadowClanner ignored her petty insults, sighing and craning his head up to the looming mountain. They didn't seem to have too long to go, and Batchaser was seriously ready for all of this to be over. The silent treatment from Cypressfall had been enough—listening to Rushingpaw's and Jackalstar's constant blabbering made him want to drive a pinecone into his head, and walking near the cat that had killed him a second time was igniting the anger stored deep within his broken soul. At least Galewhisker wasn't annoying, because that would be an extra cat to look forward to scratching.

"Over the hill and we should be close," Cypressfall murmured, speaking for what seemed like the first time in hours. "Wait... how many of these wolf claw's thingies have we finished again?"

Batchaser paused, counting on his claws. "Wolves... or that forest

or whatever... that stupid maze, weird zombie cats, uhh...whatever is next? I really hope it's nothing insane. And I'm guessing the mountain is the last mark of the dragon's claw. Because if not, I'm throwing myself off that cliff. No regrets."

"No regrets from me either. Actually, I'd love it if you threw yourself off a cliff." Batchaser sent a glare in Jackalstar's direction but stopped in his tracks. He'd been in the middle of walking over another one of the deep trenches, but plumes of smoke began spilling into the air from below him. Heat billowed at his belly and he craned his head down.

"What in StarClan's name..?"

A deep, dark red flame was spiraling towards him. Batchaser screeched and threw himself out of the way, paws shaking as he scrabbled in the dirt. His blue eyes widened, watching the lava erupt from deep within the earth and breathing life into the sky. The six cats stopped, watching with awe before the ground rumbled below.

"Oh.... so *that's* what the rumbling was," Cypressfall thought.

"*RUUUUUUN*!!!" Shellstar screeched, speeding towards the mountain without a second thought to help the others. Fire began erupting from the trenches behind them as well, sending shivers through the rock below. Galewhisker and Jackalstar, confused as ever, trampled after Shellstar with Batchaser hot on their tail. The black ShadowClanner whipped his head around to make sure his other two companions were okay—he was surprised when Cypressfall ran past him with Rushingpaw firmly grasped in her jaws.

"Come on, you stupid lump of fur!" Jackalstar screeched, stopping and turning to glare at him. "Are you just going to stand there like an idiot and get burned to death?!"

Batchaser felt fire lapping at his paws. He let out a cry of fear and ran as fast as his body would carry him. Jackalstar waited, perhaps the only selfless thing she'd ever done in her life, and ran for the mountain side-by-side with what could almost be considered

her enemy.

All Batchaser knew was that clusters of fire were leaking into the sky and that the ground was rumbling dangerously. He stopped, eyes widening as he noticed a pale flame flicker in a trench in front of them. Jackalstar tried to jump over, but the black tom grabbed her scruff and roughly jerked her back.

She whipped to him, eyes wide with anger. "Why in StarClan's name would you do that?!"

Batchaser watched a beam of bright, melting light spill out in front of them and looked over at the ThunderClan leader. "That's why. Now let's get a move on."

The two continued sprinting, avoiding the deep pits that even seemed to be spreading out farther in front of them. But all Batchaser was thinking about was controlling his breathing and not collapsing out of pure exhaustion. His wounds from the wolves, despite him pushing the pain down, *hurt*. And he hated that this still plagued his mind and rattled his pride because ShadowClan cats didn't show weakness. They never did! And this would be... no.... no exception....

Batchaser slowed down, chest feeling like it was falling apart. His legs, so sore and tired from this whole expedition, gave out and he let out a soft moan as he smacked face-down into the dirt. Jackalstar didn't notice for a moment, but only realized her black counterpart wasn't there when his hoarse gasps had ceased. She turned to look at him, and for once, Batchaser saw raw emotion in her eyes. *Fear. She's scared for me. Maybe I should be scared, too*.

But he wasn't. He couldn't find it deep within his soul to be scared, because such a large part of him didn't even *care* if he died. He'd caused enough trouble his entire life, from letting his own family die to watching desperately as his mate writhed for a breath of life. He was a disappointment. His own father hadn't even wanted him. What did that make Batchaser? It made him nothing.

"*Batchaser*!" Jackalstar's strangled sob broke through the air. He looked down, noticing burning lava seeping in through the cracks in

the earth. He did the one thing he'd sworn in his mind not to do and turned around.

Everything was red. The ground was covered with liquid fire, smoke clouding around his face that he'd only just noticed. He couldn't see the specks of grass anymore, instead blobs of orange and crimson pooling below his feet. Batchaser closed his eyes, shaking from nose to tail-tip. *This is fine. Death is fine. The others will have escaped, that's all that matters... And even if I die? At least I did something before I'm gone. And if everything is a black void of nothingness after this...* His chest constricted. *It's worth it.*

He was ready for the numb, emotionless feelings of loneliness that was soon to follow his death. But everything seemed like it was going to be swiped away suddenly, because someone grabbed his scruff, yanked him out of his place on the ground, and held him close.

A comforting paw wrapped around his neck and he pushed himself into the cat's chest fur, tears leaking out of his eyes. "I'm sorry," he whispered, voice breaking. "I didn't... didn't mean to—"

"Hush," the voice replied, but was softer than when he'd ever heard it before. Jackalstar. This was Jackalstar speaking and Jackalstar holding him and Jackalstar nuzzling him into her chest and— he couldn't comprehend what was going on. Where was he? Was he even here? He didn't taste the vapor on his tongue and he didn't feel the liquid burning at his heels. Everything was safe here. *He* was safe here. And he was with Jackalstar. Nothing could be more comforting.

"Come on," she murmured, tugging at his paws and turning. "Can you follow me?" Batchaser nodded weakly, shakily thrumming after her. She led him through the waves of flames rolling around them, the wind tugging at their whiskers, eyes wide and star-speckled and gleaming. They stepped past a rocky boulder and the stone ground underpaw faded away. The familiar feeling of soft, green grass returned to Batchaser and he was finally grounded. The ShadowClanner gasped, sinking into the dirt and breathing heavily, roughly. He was alive. He was alive. *He was alive and Jackalstar has saved him.*

"Thank you," he coughed, the world beating into darkness around him. Jackalstar seemed worried, nosing his flank and not stopping until he softly groaned. But Batchaser could feel his life slipping away into the abyss, and he almost wanted it to take him. Perhaps he could. Perhaps he could leave all of this behind with no regrets and no worries and just... be alone. As he'd always wanted.

But another part said no. Another part of him said to stay, to fight for his friends and clean up the mess he'd created what felt like decades ago. *I sent a false prophecy to the four Clans and now I must deal with the fate. If I die— StarClan. What will I be remembered as? The weakling that couldn't even get through The Forgotten Eternity?*

That sent him spiraling into anxiety. He couldn't die, he couldn't. Batchaser had suddenly too much to live for and, even if he didn't like it, it was the hard truth. So it was to deal with it or let himself fall into the black without even going in an actual worthy way.

That can't happen...

But despite everything his mind was telling him, the tom's lungs felt like they were filled with smoke and he wondered if his organs had been filled with ash. The red flames still flickered in his vision and he tensed up, claws sinking into the ground.

I can't leave... I can't... can't..

He couldn't fight it. The numbness crept over like a constricting snake sneaking toward its prey. Batchaser grumbled something under his breath, eyes fluttering shut, all feelings and emotions dwindling into what seemed like nothing, nothing, nothing.

Batchaser was no more.

A/N: (:

Chapter 28 || The Dark Crystal

Batchaser was floating.

His paws were nestled in clusters of stars and his mind swept away all the negative emotions. Ease was all the ShadowClanner had felt here, and it was all he hoped to feel for the rest of eternity.

There was nothing here, though. No where to go and nothing to do and no one to talk to. Batchaser somehow hadn't lost his sanity yet. In fact, he felt like this was some of the best peace he'd had in several, several moons. *My last good day was back in the pine forest, sitting under that oak tree we shared between the ThunderClan border, eating a few finches under there time and time again... it was so nice. So calming. Just like this.*

He loved it. No one to bother him, no hunger and no emotions other than blissful happiness. Batchaser couldn't really remember how he got here in the first place, but what did it matter? He was here, and that was all that mattered. He was alone, and that was even better. Batchaser could never have asked for more.

And it's like I can't even remember my sorrows or regrets or grief. It's all numbed into the back of my mind and I... I can't remember anyone, I don't think. Just places. And some of my life in the real world, when I truly had been alive. But faces are still hard to decipher and I don't know what those piercing amber eyes are doing there. A memory I can't put my claw on but.... but whatever. I'm fine here. I am.

It's too peaceful to let go.

Batchaser floated like this for a long, long time. He knew hours had passed, but he also wondered if it had only been thirty seconds. Time here was different and the ShadowClanner was having the time of his life trying to figure it out. His life? Boring. But this place? It was a magical, magical wonder.

"Batchaser."

He flinched, hard. A voice?! But whose voice? It had been days! Days since he'd been here and Batchaser hadn't heard a thing! So why were voices suddenly spilling out from the void? All his hard work to figure this place out was crumbling because of this stupid voice distracting him from his thoughts and making him focus on something else other than this place. This was not acceptable!

Batchaser huffed, turning his back and kneading his paws into the stars, which seemed to evaporate into a soft sheet of fluffy white clouds. He purred, laying his head down and closing his eyes. *Peaceful once again.*

"Batchaser!"

The black tom jerked up, blue gaze sharply scanning the empty galaxy around him. What was wrong with this idiot?! He froze, slightly taken aback. *Woah, why am I so angry all of a sudden? That doesn't seem like me. I'm not angry. I'm happy. Always happy.*

Batchaser felt his heart drop. Something about this place suddenly felt very wrong. Very, very wrong indeed. *Where am I, anyway? And.... how did I... even get here..?*

"Batchaser! You're not dying on me today! Please, just... just walk a little farther."

That voice was so familiar. He couldn't put his emotions into words right now—confusion, perhaps? Annoyance that his peace was being broken by this annoying, all-too-challenging voice that was acting like they *knew* him? Batchaser wasn't dead! He was just in.. in a nice place. He was fine. And walking was impossible, anyway! There was nowhere *to* walk! Only empty space and.... and... stars, the space suddenly filled his head and his lungs and he choked on his breath and broke into a coughing fit. He cried out when the comforting stars disappeared and he was left with nothing, all that surrounded him was black and darkness and despair and all he saw were crimson waves through his eyes and he began to panic, paws flailing in a desperate attempt to move but nothing was helping, he was stuck here, forever, and perhaps it's what he deserved (why did he think that? Batchaser didn't know) anyway. Right?? This had to be the answer! Why was everything

disappearing? The happiness was leaving him and he felt grief blow through his heart and crack it open into a million pieces until he was left with nothing to pick up and no one to help him do it. He was alone. Batchaser was alone forever in this terrible, closed space with no way to move and only his mind to figure everything out and—

"Hey, calm down, calm down..."

Warmth. It flooded through his body like a comforting wave lapping at the shore of the lake, heating his organs on the inside and filling him with a fire he hadn't realized was even there before. Determination was the only thing he felt at this moment and..— StarClan— StarClan! He was remembering— He could see light. He could see light spilling into this nightmare like Lynxbite pulling him out of the depths of his mind— *Lynxbite*! Oh, thank StarClan! He— he *remembered*! He was starting to realize his life was so much more than sitting in a vast, empty void with nothing to do and only the fantasies of his brain to entertain him.

"Yes! That's it! Come on, we— we made it to the top. Just a little further. Just open your eyes...everything will be okay.."

The voice was so soft, sweet like honey but as prickly as wasps stinging him all over. Batchaser loved it. This voice. He was pulling himself towards it and the yellow light grew brighter and brighter, like he was leading himself through a tunnel that never seemed to end, but also did have an end. StarClan, what was he saying? His thought process was so jumbled and he wasn't even sure what his own name was. But he knew Lynxbite, he knew ShadowClan and what he'd done to the Clans and oh stars he'd messed everything up and now it was all crumbling again and he just needed to die and return back to that dark place because he deserved it and Jackalstar could shut up and leave him out of this whole saving-the-Clans thing and... and—

"NO! You don't get to do that! Come back to us! Come back to* me*, Batchaser. You're so close. You can undo all of this, help yourself and all the cats down below. Please. Just listen to me. Follow my voice. Please, Batchaser."

Batchaser. He remembered who he was now. The snarky, rebellious ShadowClan cat with a distaste toward sending ridiculous omens to his living counterparts. *And I'm dying. I was dead. Was I dead? Is that why everything was so peaceful and bliss and fluffy? No, I'm not dead, the light is bringing me back! I can do this! I can reach everything I wanted—maybe not to be the hero, maybe not to save the Clans, things I never really dreamed of—but maybe I can finally reach the pride of not having let everyone down in my life. Perhaps... perhaps I can make some changes to myself. And maybe someone will finally trust me.*

Maybe Jackalstar will finally trust me.

"Jack....al..."

His voice was like a puff of fresh air into his collapsing lungs. He breathed, blue eyes snapping open and taking in everything around him. A large, stone dome was curled around the six cats— wait, six? Oh, StarClan—

"BATCHASER! Y-You're alive!" A little gray-blue tom came streaking over, burying his tear-stained face in the ShadowClanner's chest.

Jackalstar shoved the apprentice out of the way and gingerly took Batchaser's paw. "Turn around."

The black tom wasn't sure, but he knew he trusted Jackalstar. He trusted her more than any cat, ever. So if she said to... well, then, he *would*. So the ShadowClanner groaned, turning and blinking in awe at the sight before him. It was—?

A huge crystal dancing with speckles of turquoise and emerald. Ruby red lined the naturally sharpened edges and cast an eerie but beautiful light across the cave wall, sinking into the six cat's shadows.

Batchaser dragged himself forward, softly shrugging Jackalstar off and staring into the depths of the crystal. Everything was going to be okay. It was. He was alive— well, as alive as a StarClan cat *could* be— and he wasn't in that dark place anymore. They were

escaping from The Forgotten Eternity. Maybe they'd be the only ones to truly succeed. And even then, Batchaser didn't care if they were.

He just wanted to go home.

The black tom took in a shaky breath, running his paws down the crystal. Everything inside him seemed to light up and he gasped. Doing the only thing he'd know how to do— maybe the giant crystal had even called out to him— he touched his nose to the side. And the light flashed before his eyes, clashing with the looming darkness and spinning him into green and red and blue spirals until it felt like he was flying through the air, the bliss sneaking back into his heart and keeping him under that sweet control and....

Everything turned black one last time.

A/N: Two chapters in one day wow I'm so gr8

Jk but this chapter was actually really fun to write and I can't wait for more. Because y'all, the story is just getting to the real plot.

Stay tuned for the next chapter (; thanks for reading, and may StarClan light your path! ✧

Mid-Allegiances

「 ***SHADOWCLAN*** 」

Leader:
Spiderstar- dark gray she-cat with yellow eyes

Heir:
None

Medicine Cat:
Cloudflame- white she-cat with yellow eyes

Warriors:
Cinderflare- dark gray she-cat with white markings with amber eyes

Snowytail- light gray she-cat with yellow eyes
Apprentice, Granitepaw

Ashleap- dark gray tabby tom with black markings and yellow eyes

Redgrowl- dark russet she-cat with gray eyes

Fireshine- flame-colored tabby she-cat with dark blue eyes

Foxshade- russet tom with black markings and amber eyes

Brindlespark- golden tabby tom with green eyes
Apprentice, Asterpaw

Emberbelly- ginger tabby tom with amber eyes

Tawnystorm- tortoiseshell she-cat with sharp green eyes

Flurryflank- white tom with blue eyes

Apprentices:
Asterpaw- orange she-cat with blue eyes and white markings

Granitepaw- bulky gray tom with sharp green eyes

Elders:
Gorsebrush- large gray tabby tom with green eyes

「 ***THUNDERCLAN*** 」

Leader:
Doestar- pale brown she-cat with soft blue eyes

Deputy:
Thymeclaw- brown tom with dark green eyes

Medicine cat:
Dawnsky- pale ginger tabby
she-cat with blue eyes

Warriors:
Hickorybreeze- cream she-cat with brown dapples and green eyes

Fallenwind- white tabby tom with yellow eyes

Mudstripe- brown tom with cream markings and amber eyes

Birchstep- pale brown tabby she-cat with a white throat and amber eyes

Bumbletongue- pale brown tabby tom with black stripes and yellow eyes

Scorch- golden tom with orange eyes and red streaks through his fur

Dappledleaf- tortoiseshell and white she-cat with green eyes

Aloethistle- dark ginger she-cat with yellow eyes

Cranecreek- black and white tom with amber eyes
Apprentice, Sunpaw

Softgaze- white she-cat with green eyes

Birdchirp- cream she-cat with blue eyes

Bramblevine- brown tom with green eyes

Wildstorm- dark gray tabby she-cat with yellow eyes

Fogcloud- white tom with darker flecks and amber eyes

Eagletalon- black tom with white swirls and ocean-blue eyes

Russetwind- dark tan and russet she-cat with yellow eyes

Raveneye- black tom with gray stripes and yellow eyes

Hivestripe- orange tabby tom with black stripes and orange eyes

Raincloud- dark gray tabby tom with white markings and blue eyes

Alderthorn- dark brown tabby tom with yellow eyes

Lostheart- white she-cat with green eyes

Fennelstalk- white and cream dappled she-cat with yellow eyes

Apprentices:

Sunpaw- pretty, long-furred golden she-cat with green eyes

「 *RIVERCLAN* 」

Leader:
Applestar- light ginger tom with green eyes

Deputy:
Pearlsnap- pale white she-cat with bright gray eyes

Medicine cat:
Timberfall- brown tabby tom with green eyes

Warriors:
Spottedsplash- russet spotted tabby tom with hazel eyes
Apprentice, Whisperpaw

Aspenshine- white tom with brown and orange dapples as well as bright green eyes

Pinestreak- ginger tom with green eyes

Cloverpetal- brown tabby she-cat with white markings and green eyes

Pollenstrike- ginger tabby she-cat with yellow eyes
Apprentice, Beetlepaw

Beavertooth- dark brown tabby tom with yellow eyes

Vixenmask- golden tabby she-cat with a white mask and green eyes

Laurelstride- silver tabby she-cat with green eyes

Duckflight- gray tom with black stripes and green eyes
Apprentice, Bushpaw

Wavetail- blue-gray tabby tom with green eyes

Sheepthroat- brown tom with white markings and cold blue eyes
Apprentice, Gatorpaw

Makofoot- blue-gray she-cat with crossed green eyes

Watercall- blue-gray she-cat with blue eyes

Apprentices:

Beetlepaw- black tom with brown eyes and a bob-tail

Gatorpaw- blue-gray tom with pale green eyes

Whisperpaw- black she-cat with blue eyes

Bushpaw- brown tabby she-cat with white markings and blue eyes

「 ***WINDCLAN*** 」

Leader:
Owlstar- brown-gray tom with deep blue eyes

Deputy:
Brightstorm- blue-gray she-cat with stormy-gray eyes

Medicine cat:
Olivetuft- orange tom with blue eyes

Medicine cat apprentice:
Jakepaw- brown tom with green-amber eyes, former kittypet

Warriors:
Juniperleaf- siamese she-cat with dark blue eyes

Sandmist- ginger tabby tom with cream paws and yellow eyes

Cardinalwing- ginger tabby she-cat with white markings and amber eyes

Silverdusk- silver tabby tom with green eyes
Apprentice, Fearpaw

Lostleg- white she-cat with gray eyes and a missing back leg

Hailrunner- black tom with dark amber eyes

Whitecloud- black and white tom with green eyes

Honeybreeze- golden tabby she-cat with dark gray eyes
Apprentice, Bristlepaw

Crowhaze- black tom with a white chest and yellow eyes

Brackenpath- golden tabby tom with green eyes

Butterflywing- white and golden tortoiseshell she-cat with green eyes

Icejay- white and dark ginger she-cat with green eyes

Stormyflight- dark gray she-cat with faint white patches and blue eyes

Mumblemeadow- black tom with dark yellow eyes

Wolftooth- gray she-cat with orange eyes
Apprentice, Snakepaw

Splashshadow- gray she-cat with black stripes and light blue eyes

Tanglecrow- black she-cat with yellow eyes

Spottedstripe- tan tom with bright green eyes

Hornleap- light brown tabby she-cat with pale green eyes

Apprentices:

Snakepaw- tortoiseshell tom with blue eyes

Fearpaw- black tom with dark copper eyes

Bristlepaw- spiky furred brown she-cat with green eyes

「 ***STARCLAN*** 」

Jackalstar- white she-cat with brown patches and blue eyes tinged with amber

Galewhisker- gray tom with black splotches and green eyes

Shellstar- white tom with black stripes and green eyes

「 ***FORGOTTEN ETERNITY*** 」

Batchaser- black tom with blue eyes

Rushingpaw- small blue-gray tom with copper eyes flecked in green

Cypressfall- calico she-cat with mismatched brown and blue eyes

Pepperclaw- gray and brown she-cat with yellow eyes

Spicetuft- huge dark brown tom with dark yellow eyes

Chapter 29 || Dimensions

[image]

**** Beautiful art of Rushingpaw by the amazing StardustWritings !!! Please check out her account and send her lots of love*** 💕

Warmth flooded through his paws like little fish kissing his claws. Batchaser's dark blue eyes snapped open, a ragged breath ripping from his jaws and filling the grassy clearing. He was visibly shaking; his spine ached, his limbs felt like they were on fire, and everything inside his head was a mess. Questions that he couldn't even comprehend were rushing through the darkness like flashes of lightning through stormy clouds. But there *was* one that he could make out...

Where in StarClan's name am I?

This was a place that look completely unfamiliar. Bird chatter echoed through the swaying branches, a breeze ruffling the black tom's fur and flopping his ears around. He groaned softly, lifting himself to his paws, feeling the muscles pop like embers in the burning flames. *And how long have I been out for...?*

Then, it all hit. He remembered the wounds taking him and succumbing him to eternal darkness. He remembered Jackalstar awakening him, worry and tears dancing in her beautiful eyes (Woah, beautiful?). He remembered the crystal in all its glory, shining through the cave like a million stars in Silverpelt. And he remembered touching his nose to the light, glitter reflecting his eyes and taking him back... taking him back to *StarClan*.

So that's it, then. After so long of traveling through the Forgotten Eternity, I've finally returned to this place.... but it doesn't seem nearly as dreadful as before. And based on how Jackalstar and Galewhisker explained... StarClan should be much more chaotic right now.

Jackalstar! Is she okay? Oh, she must be.... that tough she-cat wouldn't let anything take her. And Rushingpaw? Hopefully he isn't as

confused and alone as I am? Perhaps Cypressfall is with him.... and yes, yes, Galewhisker would most likely be with Jackalstar... A wave of jealousy seemed to rock through Batchaser. *And Shellstar.... well, who cares about Shellstar...*

The tom let go of his thoughts for a moment, scanning the surrounding area and padding forwards slowly, the faint trickle of a stream ringing in his ears. *I didn't know there were more rivers in StarClan. Just the main one that RiverClanners often hang around...*

He decided to investigate. Batchaser ducked through the foliage, leaves falling atop his head to which he shook off. A monarch butterfly fluttered in the distant wind, drifting by the ShadowClanner and leaving him breathless. *It looks so real. Has StarClan improved since we were gone? Surely not... surely we weren't away* that *long...*

A pressing feeling of discomfort rose in his belly. Perhaps it was fear; Batchaser didn't know. *All I know is that none of this feels right... it hardly feels like I'm in StarClan! And I must be here.... it was the only other place to return after the Forgotten Eternity...*

Shoving down his nausea, he continued onward. Everything was so green, so full of *life*, so... beautiful. It was like nothing Batchaser had ever seen before after death. And as he found the stream, the soft water brushing over his paws, pebbles sinking under his feet, he finally felt at rest.

Until he looked down, and stared back at himself.

A shriek ripped from his jaws. The tom scrambled back and inspected his black pelt, felt his ears and made sure his tail was still readily attached. *What in the stars...?!*

Batchaser looked again. And who he saw was hardly him. He seemed.... younger. More fit—and no wounds. But the main thing was that there were absolutely *no* stars twinkling in his fur, reflecting the moons in his dark eyes. No. He seemed whole. He seemed.... *real.*

That's entirely impossible! The tom leaned back, drawing his claws

over his fur before digging into his paw pad, watching the red liquid splutter out. Fear gripped at his heart and he set his foot back in the water. If it was truly StarClan, then he would be healed immediately. *I will be healed. I will be healed... I am not back in the real world!*

Batchaser watched the trails of blood drift with the water until his wound was clean. He lifted his paw and began to shake. The cut —it was still there, throbbing angrily and hissing pain. *Stars....no. No, this can't be happening! I'm real! Oh, no!*

He wanted to cry. It took everything within him to hold back the tears, ignoring his raw, flaming throat and instead lapped at the *real* water. *We were all wrong. The crystal didn't lead us back to StarClan. It lead us back to the living world...*

Batchaser felt his heart flutter in his chest. He wondered if he was going to have a heart attack from the shock. *I can't believe it. I'm real. But.... but where am I? I've never seen this place before—stars! What if I've lost the others completely?!*

"Hey! Who's over there?"

Batchaser's blood turned to specks of ice. It shivered up his entire body and set into his heart, which began to beat at an even more alarming rate. *Who—who was that?!*

"We see you, tough guy! Come on out!"

Oh, by the Dark Forest, this cannot *be happening.*

He dove into the nearby bushes, ignoring the racket he made and instead bolted back towards the place in which he'd woken up. *Maybe if I return I can go back to StarClan...* But Batchaser heard the cats give chase and his fur stood on end, paws thrumming in the dirt and grass below him. *No! I cannot be caught! This is* not *how my new life of living is supposed to go!*

He hadn't run in the real world for so long, his muscles already began to flame up in his body. Batchaser knew he wasn't going to be able to outrun who knows how many cats, so sighed and halted,

choking when claws pierced his back.

"Hey! Get off me!" he snapped, swirling around and throwing the smaller cat off of him. Immediately Batchaser was flanked on all sides and huffed, eyeing the glinting claws of these cats.

"Ugh! This stupid rogue threw me off!" the smaller brown tom snapped.

"Excuse me, *rogue*?" Batchaser growled, claws unsheathing. "Are you talking about yourself?"

"Um, *no*? Are you dumb?" he retorted. "I'm from ThunderClan! Obviously-"

"That's enough," a cream she-cat said, stepping forward towards Batchaser. The tom's eyes widened slowly- *ThunderClan*! He was so lucky! Perhaps his friends were around? "Who are you?"

Batchaser was too shocked to respond, but snapped out of it eventually. "What's yours?" he snorted, forgetting that he could actually be hurt down here. Perhaps disrespecting Clan members wasn't a great idea.

The molly didn't seemed fazed by his tone. "I'm Birdchirp. Your turn."

The ShadowClanner huffed. "Fair enough. I'm Batchaser."

"So you're not a rogue?" the small tom asked.

"Shut it, Bramblevine," a dark tan and russet she-cat hissed. "Don't forget you were just made a warrior. I can easily persuade Doestar to have you clean out the elder's den."

Bramblevine huffed. "Fine, but I was just asking. He doesn't *smell* like he's from a Clan!"

"I'm from ShadowClan, you idiots!" he finally shouted, tail lashing. "Seeing as all of you are too stupid or blind to tell! Now, I need you to help me with-"

Birdchirp's eyes darkened. "*ShadowClan*? Seeing as half of their cats ran like cowards to the Twolegplace, I can't even begin to imagine what other hot-tempered cats lie there such as you." She paused. "You're coming with us. Doestar will want to see you. It's been moons since we've kept a ShadowClanner hostage — perhaps you'll be lucky enough to be spared."

"*Spared*?" Batchaser flinched when the other three cats grabbed his shoulders, reeling him forwards. "Hey! *Stop*! You can't kill me! You can't! I'm not a threat! I'm not-"

"You're an enemy in this war," a dark ginger she-cat snarled. "We can do whatever we want to you, especially if that means killing all of that ShadowClan scum that caused this in the first place!"

Stars, I did this.... But Batchaser still wasn't happy about the situation — he was from StarClan! He couldn't *die*! That would be, like... for the third time!

"STOP! I swear by the stars, if you hurt me you'll be sorry—"

Bramblevine snorted, eyeing the dark ginger she-cat. "Aloethistle was right all along. You ShadowClanners are all bark and no bite. Besides, who would make us sorry? Spiderstar? Her father caused this war— she doesn't know how to *lead*! The only reason she's in power is because of their stupid new dynasty! It's no wonder your Clan is dying out."

Anger rushed through Batchaser's chest. He'd show this stupid little weasel who was *stupid*! Though he was a little concerned about this "dynasty" talk, he decided to ignore it and instead spat in Bramblevine's face. The small tom froze, turning and glaring icily at Batchaser. "What. Was. THAT?"

"My spit," he snapped. "I hope you rot! I'll *personally* make sure you wake in the Dark Forest! HAH! Not even that! The *Forgotten Eternity*!"

"How DARE you—"

"Back off, he just wants to provoke you," Birdchirp sighed,

coming between Bramblevine and Batchaser.

"He's *insane*! Speaking of this... Forgotten Eternity! There's no such thing!" The warrior hissed, stomping forward.

"Hah..." Batchaser's eyes flashed. "I can make you a believer, you brat. When you die, meet me in StarClan. We can sort out the rest from there."

"Ugh! Leave me alone!" Bramblevine padded forward and waved his tail in the black tom's face, disappearing into the bushes. Batchaser sighed, ears flicking back. *So, ThunderClan is capturing me as a means for revenge or leverage... either way, I don't think it's good. I don't even know what to do! How do I get out of this?!*

Batchaser looked at the ground. *Oh, stars... Jackalstar.... please help me..*

A/N: It's been a month and I apologize for that. I decided to rewrite how the rest of this story is going to turn out and it's taken me a long time to get over writer's block. But, I'm back! For now. And hey...get ready for some longer chapters ;)

Anyway, I hope you enjoyed reading! Things are FINALLY starting to begin... this war isn't a good one, nor is it something that will be sorted out so easily. How will the gang end it? Only time will tell if they even do!

Stay tuned for the next chapter, and please vote and comment your thoughts! May StarClan light your path ✧

Chapter 30 || The Stars Won't Save You

"You think Doestar will let me rip this stupid rogue to shreds?"

"For the last time, I'm not a rogue," Batchaser grumbled, long tail flicking behind them. They were still making their way back to ThunderClan's camp, and the tom couldn't help but feel anticipation. Birdchirp seemed extraordinarily calm, but the rest of these misfits hardly seemed to fit in with the ThunderClan stereotype. Surely this is not how the war had made them? Because if so... Batchaser had messed up more than he'd intended.

"Right, a *ShadowClanner*. Just about the same in my opinion," Bramblevine snorted, taunting Batchaser who couldn't be bothered to snap back. Instead, he continued to drift far into his thoughts, blinking slowly. *The ThunderClan I once knew is gone. If Bramblevine was being serious and they're killing cats for no reason... I have to try and do something. We all do. This cannot continue for any longer.*

He wondered if proving to them he was a StarClan cat would convince them to listen to his words. *But how do I even do that? I can bleed here — I keep my wounds. There's nothing I could do that would sway them in my favor*. He sighed, ears flicking back. *There's nothing I can do except find out what in the stars is about to happen.*

The trek continued on until the trees towered far overhead. Batchaser could faintly hear the buzzing clearing and his blood ran cold. *This will be the first time I'm returning to a Clan camp after dying... and it's not even ShadowClan*. How disappointing.

The cats were getting closer and Batchaser could now make out the camp walls. He dug his claws into the ground, ignoring Aloethistle's hostile glare and padding into the clearing with the warriors. He twitched his tail, looking around curiously. He'd never actually seen ThunderClan's camp except for the time he'd visited.... Paleheart's dream. *Where I ruined everything*... Pushing down his

guilt, Batchaser turned his head in the direction of a falling shadow. A pale cream she-cat was making her way towards them, soft blue eyes reflecting in the sunlight. If he hadn't ever met Jackalstar, Batchaser would've said this she-cat was the prettiest one he'd ever seen.

"What is the meaning of this?" the molly asked, eyes flicking to the patrol cats and then to Batchaser. "Is this a rogue?"

Birdchirp dipped her head respectfully. "Doestar-"

"No. He's from *ShadowClan*," Bramblevine snorted, cutting in. "Can you believe it? He must be an idiot to come near-"

"He doesn't smell of it," Doestar commented. Batchaser found it hard to believe this was ThunderClan's leader. She was much more soft-spoken than the one Batchaser had briefly met at a gathering one time. *Perhaps she's not terrible. Maybe it's just that a few cats are annoying and blood-thirsty...*

"But if he truly is, then I'm afraid we will have to kill him. Shame. He's so handsome." Doestar pouted for a moment and waved her tail. "Russetwind, you may do the honors."

"NO!" Batchaser struggled, muscles stiffening. "No! No! I-I'm *not* from ShadowClan!"

Doestar's eyes narrowed slightly. "I'm confused."

"As am I," Bramblevine snapped. "You *insisted* that you'd come from there! Stop lying! Doestar, he must be killed immediately!"

"NO! I-I didn't lie! Well...not exactly, but..." He sighed, watching more ThunderClanners gather around curiously. "Look, I *was* from ShadowClan, under Fallenstar's rule. Rippletail was deputy— I'm not sure if either of them are still around." Doestar stayed silent. "But- I died. I went to StarClan, died again, the Forgotten Eternity.... look, all I'm saying is that I'm hardly from here! I-I was sent back here with my friends and I have no idea what's even going on!"

Doestar looked mildly amused, but Bramblevine didn't. "WHAT?! See! I told you this stupid tom was insane! Talking about some

Forgotten Eternity..." Doestar stiffened suddenly. "There's no such thing!"

"You best watch your mouth, Bramblevine," Doestar seethed, head tilting towards the newly-made warrior. He immediately shrunk under her hard gaze, brown fur prickling. "Do not speak about what you don't know."

Batchaser blinked, confused. Did Doestar know what the Forgotten Eternity was? Surely not— only StarClan cats did. *Oh,* please *don't tell me*....

"Sunpaw," Doestar suddenly called out, turning her head gently to the side. Batchaser narrowed his eyes and watched as a long-furred golden she-cat appeared, green eyes sparkling with mischief.

"Yes, Doestar?" the apprentice asked, eyeing Batchaser.

"Put this tom in the far den. Guard him and make sure he doesn't escape." She paused. "We will talk tonight... and what is your name, stranger?"

"Batchaser," the tom grumbled, glaring at Sunpaw. What a kiss up! He didn't want to be locked away in some *cave* to rot for all eternity! He had things to do! Friends to find! Problems to solve! This was a complete waste of his time! But he wasn't stupid. There was no chance to escape yet..

"We will meet tonight, Batchaser," Doestar purred, nodding at the patrol. "Thank you for bringing him in. He's more handsome than the others." Perhaps tonight would be his chance to run.

Bramblevine rolled his eyes. "You don't *seriously* believe he's from StarClan?"

"No," Doestar replied, which made Batchaser whirl around. Then why was she keeping him here to talk?! To kill him? "But I like the insane ones. There are too few here."

"I'm not *insane*! And I AM from StarClan! None of you are listening! You-"

"Come on you filthy rat," Sunpaw hissed, claws digging into the tom's flank. She shoved him forward and he yowled, trying to rip his way out of her grasp but failed. He was being taken hostage by an *apprentice*! What was this?!

"UGH! Let me GO, or I will escort you to the Dark Forest myself!" Sunpaw snorted and threw him into the dark cave, glaring at him.

"Shut it, crazy. Doestar doesn't like the ones that scream. And if you even think about escaping, I'm going to seriously bash your head into that wall right there." Batchaser gulped, watching her point her claw to the wall. He was a little scared to even think about that now. But... whatever! She was just a dumb apprentice! Nothing to worry about!

"I'm not crazy..." Batchaser finally muttered, resting his head on his paws. This was a situation he'd put himself in. How stupid...

Sunpaw flicked her ears back, staring at the tom. He could make out the slightest glint of curiosity in her gaze. "You're not really from StarClan. I'd stop believing that immediately, or cats are going to seriously think you're mental."

Batchaser fixed her with an icy glare. "I *am* from StarClan. I just don't know how to prove it."

Sunpaw snorted, resting her bushy tail over her paws. "You can't even prove it to yourself?"

"I don't need to prove it to myself, because I already know," Batchaser argued. "But I was sent back here for a reason. I know it. Or else I would be back in StarClan..."

The she-cat huffed. "I don't even believe in StarClan, so good luck convincing me."

Batchaser froze, paws sinking into the ground. A sudden burst of laughter escaped from his jaws and he smiled widely at her. "You're an atheist?"

Sunpaw shifted on her paws uncomfortably.

"Oh, my stars." Batchaser laughed even more. "You haven't told anyone! Have you? Hm, how about I tell everyone?"

"NO!" Sunpaw leapt forward frantically. "No! Don't do that! They-they wouldn't believe you anyway!"

Batchaser's eyes glinted. "How much do you want to bet?"

"W-well then I'd just tell them it's not true!" Sunpaw yelped. "No one needs to know! And you wouldn't even get anything out of that...."

"Think again, kitty. I know you're smarter than that." He narrowed his blue eyes slightly. "Let me go and I won't tell anyone about your little... *confession*."

Sunpaw stiffened. "Never," she snarled maliciously. "I would rather *die* than betray my Clan. And if you open your mouth one more time, I will not hesitate to wipe that stupid little grin off of your stupid little face."

"Hmph. Whatever." Batchaser liked messing with cats, but wondered if his idea of blackmail could actually work. Perhaps he could make Sunpaw sorry for spilling her thoughts when meeting Doestar tonight. *Speaking of...*

Why *did* Doestar want to meet him, anyways? It seemed a little suspicious to Batchaser and he couldn't help the anxiety rising like bile in his throat. *She said I'm "more handsome than the others." What does that even mean? Does she often bring in ShadowClan cats then...?*

Ice speckled through his blood. *No. Surely she won't kill me! I'm an asset to this world! I can't die! Would I even return to StarClan?*

Questions buzzed through his head like angry bees. He didn't know what to do. Was there even anything *to* do? He'd just have to wait the day out and see what happened when Silverpelt emerged. That being said, Batchaser sighed softly, eyes flicking up to Sunpaw's rigid posture guarding the den. *I could wait for her to fall asleep, but I doubt she will. How unfortunate.*

Batchaser closed his eyes, wishing that his friends could find him

or that he could be intelligent enough to get himself out of this messy situation. Neither seemed likely. The ShadowClanner would have to rely purely on luck.

I'll try to conserve my energy and see where life leads me from there... and if everything works out? Then I can finally fix what I destroyed so long ago.

☆ ☆ ☆

"Wake up."

An angry looking orange and black tabby tom towered above him. Batchaser huffed, feigning exhaustion to put this stupid Doestar meeting off. "I'm tired. Five more minutes?"

The tom looked unamused. He roughly grabbed Batchaser's shoulders, shoving him forward and forcing him to walk. "Ugh! Fine! I'm going..."

"Nice one, Hivestripe," another voice mused. Batchaser turned and realized it was Sunpaw, leaning against the den and looking on smugly. "Beat him up a little. Maybe Doestar will like it."

Hivestripe huffed, not responding and instead leading the ShadowClanner to their leader's den. Batchaser looked on suspiciously, heart rate growing. *Is she going to leap out and kill me? Slit my throat?* The memories of his first death were all too painful, and remembering the way Shellstar had killed him... stars, Batchaser hardly felt like he could breathe. *Please, no panic attack right now...*

"You may come in. Thank you, Hivestripe." The warrior dipped his head and turned, padding down the rocks and returning to his post as the camp entrance's guard. Batchaser shakily padded inside the dark den, eyes taking a moment to adjust. He eventually spotted the cream she-cat in the corner, soft blue eyes reflecting in the shadows. "Batchaser. Welcome to my humble abode."

"Yes... hello.." The ShadowClanner twitched an ear, looking around the den. He could run, but Hivestripe and Sunpaw would be

there to greet him with their claws. Bad idea.

Doestar looked him up and down. "Come. Sit." She patted another nest with her paw and curled her tail around her feet, watching the tom's every move. Batchaser felt uncomfortable but did as he was told. Being this close to another cat was too close for comfort. *Unless it's Jackalstar...*

"You don't seem excited to be here," Doestar mused.

"Oh? I'm not expressing my love and joy from bring falsely imprisoned? My apologies. I'll go whoop my gratitude to the whole Clan." He huffed and turned away, eyes darkening. Who cared if she was a Clan leader? He was a *StarClan* cat! He'd seen so many more things! In a way, he was wiser than any cat in the real world. *That just makes me all the more powerful.*

Surprisingly, Doestar didn't seem to mind his sarcasm, and only twitched her whiskers in amusement. She leaned closer, inspecting his face. "I don't believe you are from StarClan," she whispered. "But you reflect the stars in your eyes. That must mean something."

"Yeah, maybe it just means I'm a special kind of idiot," he said, shifting back slowly and trying to avoid whatever weird thing was happening here.

"I don't think you're an idiot," Doestar countered. "In fact, I think you're quite intelligent. You doubt yourself. You mask your feelings with anger to drive the cats that care about you away."

Batchaser met her eyes, beginning to tremble. "No. You're wrong."

"I'm not," she murmured, placing her paws on his shoulders. He didn't even flinch. "You want attention, but you've convinced yourself you would rather be alone. You are lovestruck. You're telling yourself you're not worth her time, but we both know that's not true."

"How did you know?" he asked, eyes wide, leaning back slightly.

She didn't answer and instead slowly pinned him to the ground.

"I want you, Batchaser. Only you."

Suddenly, everything became entirely too overwhelming. "HEY! G-get off of me!" Memories of Lynxbite came rushing back and he shoved the leader off of him. "You creep! Is this what you do to the toms you capture?! Seduce them into-into...!?"

Doestar's eyes blazed with fury. "NO! No cat *ever* disrespects me! You're MINE!"

She rushed forward but Batchaser was ready. He slashed her cheek with his claws and she screamed out in pain, her flesh burning. The ShadowClanner stopped, gasping. What- had he done that?

There's no time... The tom turned tail and shoved Hivestripe off of the mound of rocks, who had come to investigate the terrified yowl of Doestar. Batchaser bolted out of the camp, wind flicking back his whiskers. He was free!

"Not so fast!" Claws reached into his back and forced him to the ground. Fear gripped Batchaser's heart and he turned, trying to claw at his attacker. He quickly realized it was Sunpaw. Ugh! What an idiot!

"Get OFF of me!" Batchaser threw her off, eyes lapping with furious flames. He didn't even notice the stars begin to glimmer in his pelt, reflecting Silverpelt and StarClan itself. His eyes seemed transparent, and his voice seemed to boom. "LEAVE!"

Sunpaw flinched back, eyes widening. She was visibly trembling now, head bowing slowly. "Oh, my stars," she whispered. "You truly are from StarClan."

Batchaser breathed, looking down at his star-filled fur and gasping softly. They began to fade and his eyes seemed to return to normal, as did his entire body. "Wh-What-"

"I'm sorry for disrespecting you!" Sunpaw suddenly cried out, begging with her paws. "Please don't send me to the Dark Forest! I'll do anything!"

The ShadowClanner didn't know what to say, but finally fixed her with an intense stare. "Let me go. I need to find my friends and fix the mess I've created down here."

Sunpaw nodded vigorously. "O-Of course! Are your friends from StarClan too? Oh! I.... cannot believe this actually happening.."

Thundering pawsteps we're reaching earshot. Batchaser didn't have much time left to talk. "Thank you, Sunpaw. I imagine we will meet again." He turned to run, but was stopped by her paw.

The ShadowClanner turned, narrowing his eyes. "What?"

"Please stay safe," she whispered, eyes glittering with tears. "You're regal... and our home is not safe anymore. Don't let anything happen to you."

Batchaser smiled softly, nodding. "Don't worry. I will be cautious."

She nodded, and the black tom turned tail and sprinted away. His legs aches and he huffed, hating to put up the act, but happy it got him out of that situation. *And now I can find everyone. I'm not sure where to look, but... I know they're close. I can feel it.*

Batchaser didn't even realize the mess he was leaving behind in ThunderClan. In the blink of an eye, chaos had returned.

A/N: Hey guys! A MUCH longer chapter than usual! I'm actually really happy with it and this is going to be around the length (or most likely longer) of the rest of these chapters! Now, I'm far from done, so don't fret! The first half of this book was worldbuilding, which took me nearly two long years — the rest is going to be action packed for all of you.

I hope you enjoyed this chapter! A lot happened here and we got to introduce some new characters! Some of them... weirder than others. The ThunderClan situation is odd, especially with Doestar in charge, who is.... er, unique? But the other Clans all have their own problems as well, and each of them will be explored. Stay tuned for the next chapter!

Please vote and comment your thoughts, and may StarClan light your path✧

Chapter 31 || Assignment

The wind ruffled the black tom's fur as he ran from ThunderClan's camp. His whiskers buffeted back and the tips of his ears flicked from the leaves rustling over his head. Batchaser's paws began to shake, his heart pumping out of his chest as his tail waved behind him. He wanted to escape from the territory as quickly as possible, but the ShadowClanner wasn't sure he could make it. The lapping waves of the lake rang in his ears as he neared the area, slowing down and emerging from the foliage around. Batchaser looked over the water, eyeing the stars that reflected through, casting light over the four territories. He smiled softly. It almost felt as if he were living. Maybe he was.

Batchaser's chest fell back and forth as he breathed in heavily. The tom blinked, slowly, exhausting tugging at his chest and bringing him to the dirt-ridden ground. Mixtures of sand grains sunk into his midnight fur as he lowered his head, curling his thin tail around his skinny body. He stared back over the water, hoping Sunpaw would lead the other ThunderClan cats away from the lake. Batchaser didn't want to be found again, but he was so tired he hardly cared at this point. He just needed to *sleep*. Why was he so tired? *Maybe because it took all of my power to avoid being seduced by that creepy leader Doestar*. He scowled slightly, ear twitching. Batchaser felt bad for any cat that had to be put through that event. The ShadowClanner felt like he was luckier than the others, considering he'd been able to escape. But that knowledge still presented all too many questions in his reeling head.

How was I even able *to escape? My claws... they melted Doestar's flesh, like she'd been burned by embers in a heavy forest fire.* Batchaser frowned. *I wonder if that's how it works for everyone in the living world...I'm not sure. I don't really want to test it, either. Only if I have to lash out.*

Sighing, the black tom closed his eyes, darkness overlapping his vision. It blanketed his mind and tugged him into a dull, throbbing

void where he couldn't think clearly anymore, or even see anything around him except for shadows. Stars began to glitter around his paws and wrap their way up his body, swirling through his pelt and up his neck, coloring his eyes like space. The world around him beat back into life and he saw grass sprouting from the ground, tickling his paw pads and traveling through the rising hills and twinkling turquoise sky. Batchaser eased his tensed shoulders and unclenched his jaw, tail flattening out and prickling fur smoothing out. He smiled, softly, and the black tom felt at home once more. *StarClan.*

But his smile didn't last for long. Curiosity prickled through his paws and his heart weighed with worry. *Why am I here? Who called me?* Batchaser knew the Star-filled Pool was closed... wasn't it? Shivers wrapped down his spine and the black tom moved forward, sliding his paws over the soft, silky grass below and padding over the rolling hills. He twitched his tail, narrowing his blue eyes slightly, noticing a figure in the distance. Batchaser began to sprint, taking in the white and brown fur of the cat, the glimmering blue-amber eyes; he smiled. It was her.

"Jackalstar," he breathed, bounding toward the she-cat. She turned her gaze to Batchaser, grumbling something under her breath and moving forward to meet him. The black tom slowed, tilting his head at the former ThunderClan leader. "What are we doing here?"

She shrugged nonchalantly, looking around with a bored expression.

Batchaser pursed his lips, willing Jackalstar to give him more information and actually be *interested.* "Aren't you the least bit curious? I mean, someone must have called us here, right?"

"You are correct."

Both cats whipped their heads to the side, eyes wide. Batchaser immediately noticed Galewhisker and ran forward, looking him over. "You did this?"

The gray tom nodded. "Yes. We needed to meet in an easier

atmosphere. I think this is the perfect place."

Jackalstar stood up from behind Batchaser, joining the two toms. "I agree. Seeing as we all woke up in different places-"

"Hey! Hey guys..!" The three turned toward the top of the surrounding hill, watching a small, pale gray tabby tom run down, a calico she-cat following slower behind.

"Oh, great," Jackalstar muttered, looking away and rolling her eyes. "Here we go."

Batchaser shoved the leader harshly, standing up and nodding down at Rushingpaw. Cypressfall eventually made it to the bottom of the slope, twitching her ear. "We've arrived. I'm guessing this was a planned group meeting?"

"I love being back in StarClan!" The small pale tom jumped around, face a mixture of excitement and nervousness.

Batchaser scowled. "Well, we aren't here for long. We just need one more member..."

"He's here. Unfortunately." Jackalstar cast her gaze toward the horizon. A white tom with black stripes sprinted toward the group.

"Yup. That's Shellstar, all right." Batchaser felt a flicker of anger burn within his chest, but pushed it away. Now was not the time to seek revenge and keep grudges. He could do that after they saved the Clans.

The former WindClan leader finally made it over, panting and stumbling on his paws. "I.... am.... *here*.."

"You really need to work out."
Batchaser scrunched up his nose. "You're fat and slow."

Shellstar glared at the black tom, claws unsheathing. "You want to *really* see how fat and slow I am once I rip your throat out?"

"Only if you can catch me," he smirked, leaping back to avoid catching a paw.

Jackalstar rolled her eyes and stepped back. "Let's all sit in a circle so we can see each other."

The black tom hopped backwards, sitting beside Cypressfall and Galewhisker. "I love taking on the appearance of DarkClan worshippers."

Cypressfall prodded Batchaser and smiled, ignoring his icy glare. "So, where did everyone wake up? I was somewhere off from ShadowClan's forest."

"On the border of WindClan and ThunderClan," Galewhisker said, nodding. "A WindClan patrol came by, but I was able to avoid them before they saw me."

"Good. We don't want anyone seeing us yet," Jackalstar noted. "It is imperative we stay *hidden*."

Batchaser looked away, chuckling nervously.

"I was a little father off from Cypressfall, but I found her pretty quickly!" Rushingpaw purred, looking over at the she-cat with a smile.

"Good, good, no one cares," Shellstar snorted, standing. "Well *I* woke up right by the Moonpool. In case any of you were wondering."

"That *is* why I asked..." Cypressfall grumbled.

Jackalstar rolled her glittering eyes. "No one cares about you either, Shellstar. Only me, seeing as I'm basically the leader of you band of misfits." The brown and white she-cat yawned and rolled her shoulders forward. "I think I awoke near RiverClan, but the borders were stale. Everything seemed empty. Not sure what's going on over there."

Batchaser flicked his tail, ignoring the glances from the others. "Well, let's just say... I had a little run-in with a, uh... few certain cats."

Jackalstar narrowed her eyes. "*Batchaser*. We're not supposed to

interact with anyone yet! Are you brain dead?!"

"Hey! It wasn't my fault!" the black tom snapped. "A patrol took me in and I couldn't escape. I mean, I *eventually* did, but not before that weird, creepy leader tried to *seduce* me and-" He hesitated, deciding not to mention literally burning her face with his claws. "Well, it was *weird*. They were gonna kill me until I kind of pleaded for life."

Cypressfall snorted. "I'd *love* to see you begging for life. Just kidding, that happened when we met."

"Yeah, because you're just as crazy," Batchaser grumbled, shooting daggers at the she-cat. "Anyway, ThunderClan is all too weird and annoying. They're definitely a no-no on our save list."

"We're saving everyone!" Shellstar hissed. "Even if ThunderClan is weird and annoying, they're a main part of the lake and must be fixed. They're probably just angry because all of the other Clans turned on them." The white tom bared his teeth. "Might I mention that *you* caused all of this, Batchaser?"

"Yeah yeah yeah, whatever, stop berating me," the black tom groaned, waving his paw dismissively.

"Should we check out RiverClan..?" Rushingpaw piped up, ears pricking. "Jackalstar, you said their scent was stale. Did something happen to them?"

The leader shrugged. "I don't know, but they aren't first on our list, ThunderClan is."

"Oh, of *course*, just because you're from ThunderClan that means they need the most saving," Batchaser growled, furrowing his brows at the stupid she-cat.

"You said it yourself!" she retorted, "ThunderClan is *weird* and *annoying,* and because of that should be saved! They're the most important out of anyone."

"Yeah, unless RiverClan has left the territories," Batchaser hissed. "Then you'll really be sad we didn't do more for them."

"Then *you* can go save your fish-eating friends," Jackalstar snarled. "Maybe bring Rushingpaw with you. No one cares about them because RiverClan is expendable. ThunderClan isn't."

"Hey!" Rushingpaw exclaimed.

"That is just so *like* you, making it all about yourself and your godly Clan. News flash, the lake is going to fall unless *all* of the groups are saved." Batchaser lashed his tail. "That's not hard to understand, but maybe you just have a tiny brain compared to the rest of us."

Jackalstar leapt up but Galewhisker threw his body in front of her. "Let's calm down and figure out a place to meet. Somewhere we won't get caught and can really plan for the future." He twitched an ear. "Any ideas?"

"I wouldn't know, I wasn't even born in this territory," Cypressfall grumbled, looking away. Batchaser stared at her. He wondered how hard that was.

"Perhaps the island, where we hold gatherings?" Shellstar shrugged. "I doubt these Clans get together anymore."

"Perhaps, but it's really far for all of us," Jackalstar said, pondering. "I was able to get into ShadowClan territory before falling asleep. I don't feel like going all the way back to that stupid island."

"Somewhere by the lake, maybe?" Rushingpaw offered.

"No, we'd be too visible," Galewhisker explained, shaking his head.

"The Moonpool." When Batchaser said it, he realized how brilliant it was. "That's where we'll meet. No medicine cats will be going there, especially considering StarClan can't even contact the living anymore. We'd be hidden from sight and it's closer than the island. There's enough room for all of to talk and plan. I think we should go there."

The group thought about it then began to nod slowly. "It is a

good place," Jackalstar grumbled. "I guess we should meet at the Moonpool."

"Yup. See, a ShadowClanner full of good ideas!" he explained, smirking at Jackalstar.

"Go die," she snapped, then began to dissipate. "Oh. Time to go already?"

"It takes a lot of energy to hold these meetings in the dream world," Galewhisker explained. Batchaser realized how tired the gray tom looked. "I can't do it anymore. We'll meet tomorrow."

"Will do," Shellstar said, beginning to fade away.

Cypressfall looked alarmed, tail flicking. "Where even is the Moonpool?"

"I know! I know!" Rushingpaw smiled. "I can show you, Cypressfall! It'll be a fun adventure for both of us!"

Batchaser couldn't hear the rest of their words as they left the dream. Jackalstar waved goodbye to the black tom, and suddenly darkness was covering his vision, tugging him back into the void and softening all of his thoughts until he could plan no more.

A/N: Here It is! The next chapter! It took a little longer than expected but I'm glad I was finally able to get it out. A lot is going to happen, so I'd love to hear your theories and predictions... which Clan is going to be fixed first? And what is happening to them?

I hope you enjoyed! Please vote and comment your thoughts, and stay tuned for the next chapter! ✧

Chapter 32 || Glittering Stars

Batchaser scaled the large tree branching near ThunderClan's territory, heavy leaves dipping into the lake and pulling away only when a gust of wind blew by. The black tom flexed his claws, ears pricked and alert for any signs of danger- mostly from Doestar and her warriors. He'd only been lucky to escape. Next time, he knew the odds would most likely not be in his favor.

Grunting, the StarClanner seated himself on the grass blanketed below his feet, tickling his paw pads, the green blurring his vision for a moment. Being in the real world again...he wasn't sure how to feel. Batchaser hadn't been here in moons. He guessed that time passed slower down here than in StarClan, because his chest felt heavier and his paws sunk into the ground. Was he really getting old? Could you age in StarClan? Was he weak again?

Well, it didn't do much thinking about nothing. Huffing under his breath, the black tom moved farther away from the tree, tail-tip flicking and gaze sharp for danger. The others should have been here by now; Batchaser was growing impatient and he didn't want to have to wait any longer. He figured that Jackalstar, Cypressfall, and Rushingpaw would have at least passed by here at this point. Galewhisker was most likely already near the Moonpool...as was Shellstar. The black tom craned his head up toward the sky, watching the sky blue melt away into a heavy navy, orange and pink streaks spinning through the sky, reflecting off of the lake. It was sundown; that meant Batchaser would be able to hide under the darkness of night. Another good thing about his black pelt, including that it pointed out his ShadowClan heritage. *Not that it's hard to guess based on my attitude...*

Sighing, Batchaser decided to go ahead and make his way to the Moonpool. His paws moved expertly over the terrain, stalks of wheat clumps blowing back in his face, black fur brushing over the long grass that would often rise up to his shoulders. The hills spilled away around his sight, rising and falling with no pattern. The lake

was growing farther and farther away as Batchaser closed the gap between he and the Moonpool. The black tom twitched an ear, glancing over at a white blur of movement- it was only a hare. His stomach rumbled with hunger, which felt odd, but now was not the time to try and catch prey he had no chance of killing. Moving on, Batchaser eventually saw the dip in the land, revealing nothing but shadows. But as the black tom neared, that was not the case at all.

The pool wound through a small stream, softly trickling into the hole, casting little lapping waves into the hollow encircling. A light flashed in Batchaser's gaze as he neared the pond, paws fitting into the deep clefts left by ancestors long ago. He swished his tail, ears flicking back, eyes widening- even to this day, he felt the Moonpool was a regal place. A direct connection to StarClan that only the Clans knew of... what could be more enticing?

"Welcome." A soft hum caused Batchaser to jump, fur bristling as he whipped around. It was only Galewhisker. The gray tom dipped his head, sliding forward into the dip, paws dancing around the pool as he seated himself across from Batchaser. The gray tabby blinked, looking up at the black tom with emotionless blue eyes. "Do you know where the others are?"

Hesitating, Batchaser eventually shook his head. "No. I was going to wait for them, but they were taking too long. I thought Shellstar was here..?"

Galewhisker paused. "Yes, he was earlier. I believe he went to hunt around the moors." The gray tom's whiskers twitched in amusement. "This was his home, after all."

Batchaser tilted his head. He'd nearly forgotten Shellstar had been leader of WindClan many moons ago. Of course, not during the black tom's life.. "Right..and were you a part of ThunderClan with Jackalstar?" The warrior noted how the two stuck together at the hip. Perhaps...they'd been mates before? That thought sent Batchaser reeling in jealousy. Surely not? Jackalstar didn't seem like the kind of she-cat to settle with someone else, especially not with a feline as calm as Galewhisker.

At this question, the gray tom's eyes flashed with an unreadable

emotion. "Yes, I lived in ThunderClan," he answered quietly. "But was never able to get to know my parents well."

Batchaser's heart suddenly felt heavy in his chest. He knew all too well how much it hurt to lose his family. "I'm sorry," he eventually murmured, looking down at the glittering stars flickering in the pool. That's what it looked like, at least.

The two were silent until a rumble of pawsteps neared. Batchaser looked up at the mostly dark sky, seeing a small strip of the moon shining down. Good. This was no medicine cat meeting. Sniffing, the black tom soon realized it wasn't normal Clan cats- no. Only dead ones here.

Shellstar was first to enter, carrying a small bone that Batchaser could only guess was from a rabbit. Next, Jackalstar, and finally Rushingpaw and Cypressfall. "About time," Batchaser grunted, eyeing the four as they scattered around the pool.

Looking into the water, Cypressfall seemed the most amazed. "Wow," she murmured, showing the slightest hint of a smile. "Back in the old territories, we had the Moonstone...but this is beautiful." Her eyes flashed. "I do miss the forest."

Batchaser huffed. *Ugh, ThunderClanners*... But his pelt prickled with unease thinking back to Doestar and whatever she'd attempted. The black tom honestly didn't really want to know what would've happened if she'd succeeded.

"Well." Jackalstar stretched her limbs, splitting her jaws into a wide yawn. "I suppose we should talk in-depth about what's going on in the territories now."

Shellstar nodded, eyes dark. "Yes. While I was hunting earlier, I could feel a change in WindClan. Something is shifting, and I don't know what it is. It's unnerving me."

The black tom rolled his eyes. "Feelings aren't going to help us much. What we *do* need is facts: such as ThunderClan being insane!" His hiss gained disapproving looks from Jackalstar, Galewhisker, and Cypressfall. The warrior sneered. "What? It's true!

Their leader is crazy! First off, they captured me with no reasoning whatsoever, called me a *rogue*-"

"You do look like one," Cypressfall noted, shrugging.

Batchaser huffed. "Then, they imprison me in their camp with some lowly apprentice guarding me! I mean, how dumb are they?! However, I was unable to escape due to the guards posted in the front and back, there was no way I would've been able to slip through. So, inevitably, they lead me to Doestar's den. And it was...weird.." The black tom's fur ruffled uncomfortably. "Of course, I escaped, but not without some information. ThunderClan is not good here, at least their leader and most of their warriors aren't." Jackalstar frowned. "Doestar has something weird going on, I'm not sure what it is, perhaps simply a need for control, but I don't doubt she has a plan hidden under her paws, we just need to watch and see what they're conspiring about."

Jackalstar sighed, her brown and white fur ruffling with the breeze. "I knew this would happen," she admitted grimly. Batchaser's ears pricked with surprise. "Lilacstar was a fine deputy. And after my death, she chose Cedarstar, who in turn... chose Doestar." The leader grunted. "Doestar was always a lowly warrior. She acted special, but it wasn't difficult to see through her mask. I suppose Cedarstar fell for it, the idiot..."

Batchaser's fur bristled as Galewhisker spoke. "Whatever the case, ThunderClan needs help, most likely sooner than I would have hoped. The other Clans will have to wait, it seems."

"Now, wait a second." The black tom showed his teeth. "Yes, ThunderClan is in trouble, but so is every other group. What if cats die because we only focus on your stupid Clan?"

"They're not *stupid*," Jackalstar hissed, tail lashing. "ThunderClan is strong; they just need a little push. A ripple to get things moving on the inside."

Batchaser stood up, not missing Rushingpaw's widening eyes. "And? Are you telling me ShadowClan isn't in danger?"

Jackalstar leapt to her paws. "Oh, you *act* like you're not selfish, don't you? But you're just as hypocritical as the rest of us." She narrowed her sharp blue eyes. "You just want to fix ShadowClan first because it's where you were born! Well, news flash, ThunderClan needs the help more!"

"And RiverClan..." Rushingpaw muttered, pressing himself into Cypressfall.

"And *WindClan*!" Shellstar snarled. "Something is wrong! I just can't pinpoint what it is...I'm sure I can soon enough, though!"

"*Enough*!" Galewhisker rose, eyes blazing, fur bushing with fury. Batchaser snapped his jaws shut, eyeing the gray tom. Maybe the ThunderClanner would have a plan. "Arguing won't get us anywhere. Perhaps it would be wise to split up between Clans." Cypressfall growled. "Shellstar and I can infiltrate WindClan to find out what's going on. Jackalstar, you can spy on ThunderClan and report back information as it's found. Batchaser, you explore ShadowClan and figure out what's going on." Galewhisker turned his gaze to Rushingpaw. "Cypressfall, Rushingpaw, you two should travel to RiverClan and figure out what the problem is."

Rushingpaw looked excited, smiling up at a content Cypressfall. Even Jackalstar mirrored happiness. *Shouldn't I be happy?* Why wasn't he?

"Seeing as RiverClan's scent was stale, you'll have to cross the river and find out what is happening over there," Galewhisker went on, blinking. "Shellstar, you are content with going to WindClan with me?"

The huge white tom shifted on his paws, frowning. "There's something I've not spoken about quite yet." Everyone looked the leader's way, willing him to continue. Batchaser narrowed his eyes suspiciously. "The current leader of WindClan is my great nephew—Owlstar." Jackalstar's eyes widened in shock—the black tom was surprised she hadn't known about this, and it seemed no one did. "I don't think he'll notice me, but I remember when he was born. That was close to before I died." Shellstar's gaze hardened. "Now that I've returned to the real world, I remember how I died. The cat that

murdered me nearly killed Owlstar's son, Snakepaw, too. Of course, I only saw this before the Star-filled Pool closed." The black-striped tom's claws tore into the ground. "I fear there is a murderer in WindClan's ranks. The vision I had in StarClan was dark, and it dissipated before I could tell who the cat was. What if they are still here, roaming around? And what if they recognize me?"

For once, Batchaser saw fear sparkle in Shellstar's eyes. He still didn't fully forgive the tom for killing him in cold blood, but understood the reasoning behind it. Honestly, Batchaser would've killed himself, too.

"You don't know what the cat looked like?" Jackalstar asked, tail tip twitching. "The one that, you know, *killed you*?"

Shellstar looked embarrassed and flattened his ears. "No. There was a flash of dark fur but my vision was covered by blood before I could figure out who it was. Besides, I didn't remember my death in StarClan... though I wish I had." The white tom looked at Batchaser, frowning. "I'm sorry for what I did to you, Batchaser. I sincerely am. I was selfish and angry and... I shouldn't have done what I did. I'm no better than the cat who killed me..." Shellstar bowed his head, shaking.

Rushingpaw stood up and padded around the pool—much to Cypressfall's surprise—and nuzzled his head into the crook of Shellstar's neck. The huge tom grunted in surprise, but seemed to relax at the apprentice's warmth, smiling softly. "And you, Rushingpaw.... I will never forgive myself for doing the same to you. You're innocent, and you didn't deserve to see so much death—from yourself, no less. I hope you can forgive me, and if you can't, I understand."

Rushingpaw blinked up at Shellstar, shaking his head. "I know it was just an accident. I shouldn't have gotten in the middle of it." The little silver tom's eyes flashed. "I remember how I died, too..."

Batchaser's heart leapt into his throat, feeling surprise that his friends were finally understanding what it felt like to die and to remember it so vividly. "I.. I fell in the river, my sister was there." The black tom's head snapped up. *Sister??* "I couldn't swim...and she

couldn't save me. I want to see them, back at home. I know they'll recognize me! And that will restore their faith in StarClan if it has been lost at all!" Rushingpaw smiled. "But I don't really know how to swim... how will I get across the river?" The idea that Rushingpaw had a sister and he hadn't known was nagging at Batchaser's mind, but he had little time to ponder over it when-

"How will *we* get across the river," Cypressfall snapped, standing and glaring at Rushingpaw through slitted eyes. "We'll find a way, don't worry about that."

Batchaser scoffed. "You can't even swim, yet you want to accompany him on this journey to RiverClan's camp? Did you miss the *river* part?"

"And I'm sure *you* can swim!" The calico retorted, fur fluffing up and fangs showing.

"I *do* know how to swim!" Batchaser curled in his claws. "All ShadowClan apprentices were taught to in the lake!"

"Yes, the *lake*. Doesn't sound like a river to me!"

"It's better than nothing!"

She growled. "You don't even know how to take care of him! You're just a mean old badger that snaps at him any time you want! Don't you know what that does to a cat?!"

Batchaser stalked forward, shoving Galewhisker out of the way. He probably wasn't allowed to fight at the Moonpool, but doubted StarClan was watching. They had their own issues. "And *you* know better? The cat that introduced herself as a psychopath?! I doubt you even had kits!"

"I did!" Cypressfall's wail broke the air like shattering fragments of the sky. Batchaser cringed, ears flicking back. "Now come with me! And I'll tell you why I'm going with him!" The tortoiseshell roughly grabbed the black tom, dragging him a few fox-lengths outside of the Moonpool and nearly shoving him down the rolling hill. "You idiot! I really hate you sometimes!"

Batchaser stood up, curling his lip at her. "What? I was just being rational! If you don't know how to swim, then it's a mouse-brained idea to lead Rushingpaw back to his home! Even if you had kits-"

"Rushingpaw feels like my own kit," she snarled, eyes gleaming. "After I lost mine... Well, I found them in StarClan, but then I was killed. That was years of not seeing my children. I don't even know where they are anymore..." Tears welled in her mismatched eyes, a new sight Batchaser hadn't expected to see. "Most likely in the old forest. They probably weren't told to follow the others- and now they're all alone, with no one to watch over them, wondering why their mother abandoned them.." The she-cat shook with heavy breaths. The black tom sighed and slid forward, wrapping his tail around Cypressfall's shoulders and holding her close. He didn't particularly like being so near another cat, but it was for a friend. Someone not completely idiotic.

"You know..." The calico finally began, spluttering out a dark laugh. Batchaser figured this wasn't really that funny. "My sister is the one that killed me. In StarClan, I mean. She always hated me. Why? Don't really know, she was a stuck-up little brat." Cypressfall growled. "I was born with Icekit to my parents, Almondsong and Robinfoot. I suppose I was different from the other ThunderClan kits. I didn't want to play- I hated games. I always had a colder outlook on life, never really laughing or smiling...pretty sure my parents thought I was crazy." *I don't blame them...* "So, my parents generally avoided me. Not like I cared that much.." Batchaser twitched his tail. He could tell she cared, but it was easier to try and convince herself that she didn't.. "As apprentices, I was given a highly respectable mentor, Ivywind... Icepaw believed she had an 'average' mentor. What that means, I have no idea, but I was so angry at her for being so narcissistic all the time, believing that she was the center of attention, thinking she was the best. And my parents agreed! They further encouraged her insane ideas! And they hated me..."

Batchaser hesitated. "You know, you don't have to talk about this if you don't want to-"

"No, I want to," she said, fur bristling and eyes wide. "I've never told anyone else this story...I'd like to finally get it off my chest."

Oh, great.... why me out of all cats?!

"Anyway..." Cypressfall cleared her throat, continuing. "I loved my mentor. She was more of a mother to me than Almondsong. She taught me well- I became the best fighter in the Clan, but Icepaw was always seen as better...just because she could hunt and climb." The calico scoffed. "She could hardly defend herself from a mouse!"

"Wait, do you actually have to defend yourself from a mouse?"

"Quiet! We both became warriors- of course, Cypressfall, and Iceslash. Terrible name, she didn't even know how to unsheathe her claws right.. Somehow, we were on good terms. Me and my sister would fight less often and we actually got along some of the time. My parents would even include me in conversations- I think Ivywind spoke to them, but I suppose I can never be sure. And then..." The she-cat's eyes darkened. "Leaf-bare came. It was not an easy season- in fact, it was a very white one. Ivywind was growing older day by day." She began to shake. "She... she was taken by Greencough. Our medicine cat tried his best to revive her, but she was already too far gone.."

Batchaser twitched, entwining his warmth around Cypressfall. How was he expected to comfort her? He had no idea what to do... "Wh-When Ivywind died...my sister *laughed*." Hatred lapped in the depths of the calico's gaze. "I never forgave her after that. In fact, I wanted to kill her. So I walked away, but not without leaving a piece of my hatred in Iceslash's memory." She curled her lips back into a snarl. "I stuffed my sister's favorite prey with deathberries, because she was a horrible binge-eater that only did so when she was stressed. I knew her too well. And when she ate that finch... she was going to *suffer*." Cypressfall's claws extended and Batchaser tensed up, wondering if he should let her continue. But her eyes melted into a pool of grief and regret, her fur smoothing back down on its own. "Instead, my father ate the prey. I had forgotten they were so alike- Robinfoot and Iceslash- even same in coloring. And.... well, he'd ate all the deathberries so that no evidence was left behind. His convulsions were based on a seizure- from shock over my mother's death. I grieved for my father. He'd been kinder than Almondsong. But all I cared about was seeing Iceslash cry. I wanted to break her between my claws, slowly and slowly until she was

hardly even living. I..." She paused, breathing out. "I admit, I was a little far gone, but I couldn't control my emotions. I wish I had been able to..."

Batchaser made a face and reluctantly muttered, "So... continue.."

Cypressfall shook for a moment before regaining her composure, tail flicking nervously behind her. "My sister noticed my change in behavior- of course she did- and the poor idiot tried to call me out on it. I guess telling her she deserved it ended that quickly." She shrugged nonchalantly, but her eyes betrayed the expression. "I was right. She did deserve it. I don't regret telling her so, either."

But the she-cat changed for a moment. Her jaw clenched, her ears pricked, brows furrowed. "That's when it began. I saw Iceslash sneaking out one night under the midnight moon, she didn't even make a sound as she slipped out. Of course, I was curious, so I pursued." She let out a soft huff. "She traveled to the large Twoleg tunnel between ThunderClan and ShadowClan territory. There was a black tom there, they were meeting up, as if they'd done it before." She growled. "His name was Shadestalk. Handsome, charming, flirtatious, all the things I hated and all the things Iceslash loved. I decided that, after they went their separate ways back home, I would convince Shadestalk to stop seeing my sister! And then I would inform Treestar of the situation!" The calico grunted, shoving herself away from Batchaser roughly. "I was stupid, I was a brat and I was a snitch. But it was all out of spite. Anything to see my sister crumble beneath her own mistakes."

"After a few idle hours, Iceslash left to return to her nest and I pounced on Shadestalk before he could walk away. But... he wasn't upset, in fact, he was amused! After I'd attacked him, no less! He found my anger cute, those were his words. I bluntly explained to him that I was Iceslash's sister and was telling my leader of this forbidden relationship, unless Shadestalk called it off the next time they met. He thought for a moment, then said he... he'd rather meet *me*. That he could change *my* mind about the situation." She turned her hopeless gaze to Batchaser. "I suppose I was young and stupid. We continued meeting behind Iceslash's back, but I wasn't doing it out of spite anymore.... I truly did love him."

"...Did..?" Batchaser questioned.

Her eyes flashed but she didn't answer. "I know Shadestalk ended his relationship with my sister soon after we began meeting, I could see it in the way Iceslash moved, she would cry at night for seemingly no reason. My Clanmates were worried about her, not me though. She could die for all I cared. In that moment, the only one I cared about was Shadestalk." She smiled nostalgically, but it was a far away look that ruffled Batchaser's fur. "After our deputy was killed in a fox attack, Iceslash was named deputy under Treestar's rule. The anger was restored in my heart, not because I wanted the position, but because I knew my sister did not deserve it. However, Shadestalk convinced me not to act on any transgressions, and I listened to him. For once, it seemed a cat actually cared for me, and I couldn't have been happier."

A bolt of lightning flashed in the corner of Batchaser's eye, causing him to jump and grimace at the loud *boom!* the thunder left. Cypressfall seemed chillingly unaffected. A storm was coming, but the tom wasn't sure if that could apply elsewhere. "A few months passed by and I learned that I was pregnant. Icestar had taken over as leader and, of course, didn't choose me as deputy, but it was fine... I didn't want it, not at all." She smiled, but it looked broken and sad. "I told Shadestalk, and he seemed...different, I suppose. But we planned to meet up back at the tunnels the night before the next full moon and run off, raise our kits in a place with no rules, only us as their guidance, no Clanmates glaring at us or at them for their heritage..." Cypressfall hesitated. "It became obvious I was pregnant, Icestar was first to notice and continuously questioned me about who the father was, but I told no one. It would be unwise, my sister was capable of anything. A few days before the planned meet up I realized I was having my kits. But- but I wanted Shadestalk to be there, I wanted to meet with him and have him at my side when our kits were born. So I stumbled out of the nursery and made my way toward the tunnel under the Thunderpath..."

Batchaser wasn't sure where this was going, but ultimately concluded that it would end with her death. The horrified glare in Cypressfall's gaze told him just as much. "I had my kits before the tunnel, alone, drenched from the storm, muddy, and horrified...I've

never felt such pain in my life. I hated the process, but what was given to me was more than I could have ever asked for." Her eyes welled with tears and she began to choke on her words, emotions swelling in her throat. "I didn't want to name them after Clan names... so I concluded that the dark gray she-cat was Lilac, the fully black tom was Panther, and the one that looked just like me, tortoiseshell fur and all..." Her voice broke. "I named her Pumpkin, not even wondering if Shadestalk wanted to name them... but it didn't matter, did it? Because I looked through the tunnel when I felt a presence. It was him, yellow eyes peering at me. I was unnerved, I couldn't move, I just wrapped my tail around my beautiful little kits and asked why he was here. After all, we hadn't been meeting. But Shadestalk hardly gave me a word, he moved forward like a shadow, and he snapped my leg like it was a feeble twig."

Her eyes watered and her paws shook. Batchaser hesitated, not moving too close to her yet. "He was so much stronger than I was...he grabbed my shoulders and threw me to the side, I didn't have time to react, I couldn't *move*... my leg prevented me from doing so, I was weak from the kitting, but I still tried to dive forward when he grabbed my little Panther, when he spilled open his belly with a single claw and watched the blood pour out-" Cypressfall began to sob, quivering and holding herself against Batchaser, hot tears leaking out of her eyes. Shock ripped through the black tom's entire body, he couldn't move, stiff as a tree. "Shadestalk buried Pumpkin- b-buried her alive, as if she was a piece of prey to be deposited before returning back to camp. I couldn't reach the hole, not before he slammed L-Lilac into a-a tree, k-killing her almost instantly..." She gasped out, sobbing quietly. "And then h-he killed me, leaving me to no last words, not giving m-me any reason, just like that...and wh-when I awoke in StarClan to meet my kits, I couldn't remember how I died. I was almost surprised I was in StarClan instead of the Dark Forest, to be honest."

He wondered if this horrid story would be over soon, because Batchaser was done listening and he feared he was going to throw up. How could she even be *okay*? "When Icestar died she told me of my death, how ThunderClan had tried to avenge me and my kits by following Shadestalk's scent into the wilderness but...he was just...

gone..the skies only reach so far, and unfortunately for us, not too far from the Clans. When he dies, he'll either go to the Dark Forest or another ancestor miles away from here." She narrowed her mismatched eyes, trying not to shake anymore. "And then Icestar killed me in StarClan because I still hated her. She wanted me to kiss her paws for trying to avenge me... but of course, I knew why she'd done it, because it made her look good and because those should have been her kits. I could see through her mask. It angered her, so she killed me for not being thankful." Cypressfall snarled. "I was sent to the Forgotten Eternity, wishing to return back home for years. I saw few come and none ever returned from their journey to the mountain. You and Rushingpaw were kind enough to help me, but I still lost my kits in our old home, I'm sure of it, but perhaps my sister did one good thing and stayed back to watch over them. Because if she traveled with the Clans to this new territory." Her teary eyes gleamed with murderous intent. "I'll make sure she never breathes safely again."

Batchaser wasn't sure what to say. He swished his tail, fur dampening with the she-cat's dribbling tears, and he wondered how much longer she would stay like this. But Cypressfall stood, pushing the tom away, ears perking. "Now you see why I need to go with Rushingpaw. I cannot lose another kit. Please, Batchaser." She turned her broken gaze toward him. "Let me to."

As much as the black tom wanted to, as much as he hesitated to say no, Batchaser knew the two would never be safe alone. Cypressfall didn't know the territory and Rushingpaw was incapable of defending himself. Besides, neither could swim, Batchaser could do more than those two combined. Didn't that mean something? "Cypressfall, I understand your good intentions, but you must understand that Rushingpaw will be safer with me. I know the territory, the scents, how to swim, where the camps are.." He paused, meeting her narrowed glare. "And I promise, I will be kind to him. No more harassment and bullying from me, you hear?"

This seemed to calm the she-cat down a little. He sighed, blowing back air in relief. "So does this mean...?"

"Yes, I suppose," she sighed, wiping away the tears gathered around her eyes. "I will allow you to go. But Batchaser, if anything,

and I mean *anything* happens to him, you'll be first on my list of cats to kill." Her claws flashed in the pale moonlight, stars twinkling in the sky high above. And the black tom didn't doubt her words for a moment.

"I promise," he finally agreed, dipping his head. "It's a deal."

A/N: WOW!!! The longest chapter I've had so far! I do apologize for this taking longer than I expected, but I've been planning up to chapter 50 of this story and finally decided to get the next chapter out! It was originally going to be much shorter but I combined two chapters together, so I hope you enjoyed!

Anyway, what do you think? I know it was a lot to process and read and Cypressfall's story is horrible... but that's what I do to my characters! So, yeah! Theories? Ideas? What do you think is gonna happen to Bat and Rushing when they reach RiverClan? What's ThunderClan's deal and where the heck is ShadowClan? All things that will be answered in time!

Well, here it is! Please vote and comment your thoughts, and may StarClan light your path!

Chapter 33 || Rushing Rapids

The storm rustled the branches of the trees towering above Batchaser's head. The black tom moved forward through the territory, fur prickling with anticipation and ears perked for any potential dangers. His paws softly brushed over the amber leaves below, crunching and cracking under his dried pads. The tom huffed, tail flicking, face scrunching up into a grimace as the sweet scent of the oak trees drifted into his senses, about as strong as ThunderClanners and their egos.

Well, at least I was able to convince Cypressfall to let Rushingpaw come with me, Batchaser mused, eyes flickering over to the small silver tabby. *Not that it was any easier getting away from Jackalstar and those others, at least they'll be preoccupied with WindClan and ThunderClan. Though...I am expected to investigate the ShadowClan problem after dropping off this little idiot to RiverClan, then we'll be closer to saving the Clans and closer to getting home*.

A pang of guilt made Batchaser shiver, ears twitching. He knew he'd promised Cypressfall not to insult Rushingpaw, but if it was in his head it didn't count, right? *Well, it doesn't count to me*, the black tom snorted, watching the leaves fall from above.

The day was crisp, orange and pink streaks coating the sky in speckles and splotches, like a blue dappled cat's pelt. The sun was soft and almost cool, the breeze that flew between the branches helped to blow away any potential heat. After sleeping close to the Moonpool the previous night, he and Rushingpaw had trekked out to RiverClan as quickly as possible.

Though I wonder if we should've gone across WindClan territory instead... Batchaser turned his head across his shoulder, slitted eyes gazing toward the rolling slopes, stalks of grass blowing in the wind from afar. Daisies sprinkled over the moors and trees were placed in a few clear spots every now and then, but it was otherwise impossible to hide anywhere. *And if we ran into a patrol.. who knows what they'd do, rip us to shred for being rogues. I somehow doubt that*

any sane cat would believe we're actually from StarClan.

Except Sunpaw, but that was besides the point, Batchaser had actually showed his power there... *Did I, though? I mean she let me escape..that must account for something, anything works as long as I'm away from Doestar...*

The tom stood still for a moment, looking back over the hills and watching the bubbling storm in the distance, rumbling and groaning as the danger neared. Batchaser knew he and Rushingpaw would need to make it to the river before it started raining or else it would be impossible to cross for who knows how long. He could swim in a lake- not rapids. *And seeing as Rushingpaw died by falling into the water...* Batchaser glanced back at the silver tom pouncing on a pile of leaves. *Well, I'm not exactly determined in either of our skills.*

"Okay, time to move on," Batchaser muttered, flicking Rushingpaw's ears with his tail and sliding forward over the leaf-strewn ground. He noticed that the branches were losing their colors- it seemed to be leaf-fall, and Batchaser didn't actually mind this season, but knew leaf-bare was nothing looked forward to by the Clan cats. *And if the war is still going on...*

Pushing those thoughts out of his head, the black tom waited for Rushingpaw to follow before moving under the trees, fur brushing over the undergrowth. He'd decided that it was most safe to travel inside the territory instead of right by the lake- they had a better chance of being missed here, plus their scents were mostly covered and their pelts could better blend in. He wouldn't have been as cautious if it was just himself, but seeing as Rushingpaw was here, Batchaser knew they had a larger probability of getting captured by ThunderClan. *Only because he's loud*, the warrior added dryly.

Continuing over their course lead to little sound, not even the birds seemed to sing here. Batchaser could clearly remember the pines bringing all kinds of prey, and for a second, a pang shattered his chest like dry ice. He frowned, but only momentarily before catching up to Rushingpaw, who had strayed a little farther ahead. He didn't need to remember his old territory right now. StarClan was his home anyway.

"Careful," he said, eyes darkly cast over the territory. Even if it felt like they were alone, Batchaser didn't fully trust his senses. Anyone could be lurking.

"I'm careful!" the little tom purred, chest puffing out and eyes sparkling with kit-like innocence. *It still wonders me how he's even an apprentice...* "Trust me, I'll see any danger coming, you can count on me!"

Pawsteps suddenly sounded from slightly afar. Batchaser stiffened, muscles tensing and eyes widening, fear burning all over his body and causing his fur to begin bristling. The black tom roughly grabbed Rushingpaw and shoved him aside, scrabbling under a bramble bush and hissing in pain when the thorns jabbed into his sensitive skin. *I keep forgetting I can get hurt down here...* Waving his tail in front of the apprentice's face to silent him, Batchaser narrowed his eyes and stared out at the forest, claws unsheathed and digging into the dirt below in case they needed to be used in a possible upcoming situation.

The sharp tinge of ThunderClan reaches the black warrior's nose and he knew immediately that these were threats, lurking about the forest and just ready to bring something- or some*one*- back to Doestar. *And seeing as they already know me, it'll be impossible to talk my way out of anything!* Stifling a growl, Batchaser continued watching the treeline, bracing for incoming claws or a screeching excitement pointing out their hiding place. *Please, StarClan, let us pass by ThunderClan without being caught...*

After a few more minutes of waiting, the pawsteps sounded again and Batchaser became alert once more. He noticed brown fur slipping between the foliage, voices rushing to his ears and causing his eyes to slit. A smallish brown tom with dark green eyes appeared from the trees, tail flicking nervously behind him and eyes looking like a murky pool of regret and fear. *I don't remember seeing him in ThunderClan...*

"Thymeclaw!" A younger voice sounded from behind the tom, causing his head to jerk back quickly, almost as if he was expecting to be attacked. But his fur smoothed when he apparently recognized the cat, who was a pale brown tom with black stripes and yellow

eyes that glowed like sunflowers dancing in the wind. "You left me behind again!"

Batchaser narrowed his eyes; this other tom didn't seem particularly annoyed or anything, in fact, quite the opposite. A certain affection seemed to pass through these two cats. *Hm...Thymeclaw seems older, so perhaps they're related somehow? Father and son?* For some reason Thymeclaw didn't seem like a very strong parent, but Batchaser couldn't say much.

But it momentarily stopped when a huge black tom ducked his head under the leaves, blinking his dim yellow eyes when he appeared in the clearing. An air of authority definitely surrounded this tom, and he almost seemed surprised when his eyes landed on Thymeclaw. "Oh. Fancy seeing you here, Thymeclaw. How is your deputyship going?" The words seemed almost accusing, as if there was a rivalry between these two, but Batchaser couldn't completely tell.

The brown tom looked almost embarrassed, shuffling his paws in the soft dew-covered grass. "Oh, yes," he murmured, ears flicking back. "It's doing well, thank you... and, Raveneye, I'm sorry about your mother. She was a fine deputy and an even finer cat. M-My condolences..." Thymeclaw looked lost.

Well, someone doesn't have a way with words, Batchaser thought. *But I guess Raveneye's mother was killed? And Thymeclaw is the new deputy?* The black tom eyed him with a frown. *Not very deputy-like, either...*

Raveneye just stared at Thymeclaw before turning away, flicking his tail and not responding. The giant black tom opened his jaws, letting the scents drift in.

"Anyway," the unknown pale brown tom finally spoke up, attempting to break the awkwardness between everyone. "We should get on with this hunting patrol. Doestar won't be happy if we return to camp empty-pawed."

Raveneye didn't respond, most likely because he hadn't been on a patrol, while Thymeclaw looked at the tom with glittering eyes.

"Great thinking, Bumbletongue!" He cast an anxious glance toward the huge black tom, who was standing and staring into the treeline, eyes drifting toward where Batchaser and Rushingpaw were hiding. The little silver tom began to shake, whether from anticipation or fear, Batchaser didn't know. But he grabbed Rushingpaw to hold him in place and accidentally snapped a frail leaf from under him, grimacing, heart beating out of his chest. *No! We're so close to the border, too!*

"Did you hear that?" Raveneye rumbled, sharp yellow eyes scanning the clearing, claws unsheathing from his monstrous paws. Batchaser had to hold himself back from giving Rushingpaw a hard glare. *Idiot! I should never have agreed to come.*

"No," Thymeclaw responded, ears pricking. "I was talking to my son." *So that's how they're related...but there's no time to dwell! We just have to stay silent, and StarClan help Rushingpaw do so!*

Raveneye curled his lip. "Rogues—they're here, or just recently passed." Batchaser narrowed his eyes. *I'm not a rogue*.

"Do you think it was the cat Doestar captured yesterday?" the deputy asked, beginning to sniff around the bushes curling around the clearing. Raveneye grunted in response, sliding forward silently and brushing into the foliage, leaving the open to investigate further. Bumbletongue looked slightly lost and decided to follow the black tom.

It was almost like life stopped as Thymeclaw made his way near the bramble bush, grunting at the scent that inevitably was distinguishable when getting closer. Rushingpaw closed his eyes tight, fur lifting, while Batchaser tensed his muscles. He was ready to protect his friend, and no cat would stop them from returning the apprentice home, especially not some lowly deputy! But it seemed that Batchaser's worst dreams came true, because Thymeclaw met the warrior's dark blue eyes, staring into a trickling coldness that didn't dare to move. The brown tom seemed to hesitate for a moment, then swept his body away and padded after Raveneye.

Wha... What?! He let us go? Just like that? He had to have seen me! It was impossible for him not to! We made eye contact! Questions

reeled through Batchaser's head. He was having a hard time understanding why he, an enemy cat, was just let go by their enemy's deputy, especially when Doestar wanted him captured. What was going on?!

"No time, let's go!" Rushingpaw murmured, taking the lead this time and scrabbling out from under the bush. Batchaser blindly followed the silver tom, choking when thrumming pawsteps sounded from behind. *Raveneye...*

"Faster! Come on!" Batchaser would have grabbed Rushingpaw by the scruff since his ear-tips only met below his shoulder, but feared that would slow both of them down even more. The ThunderClanner was gaining on their tails, but Batchaser saw the pines in the distance, swaying with the wind and welcoming them to the darkness. *Come on, a little further, we can make it....!*

And then claws. Batchaser gasped out a small breath, flicking his head around letting his paws fly toward his attacker. It was Bumbletongue! Growling, the black tom removed his grasp from under the ThunderClan cat, sliding between his legs and raking his claws under his belly. Brambletongue yowled in pain and sliced his claws down Batchaser's flank, earning a hiss. The StarClan warrior eyed his opponent: on the smaller side, lean and most likely used planned attacks, it should be easy to avoid them, right?

Batchaser's momentary pause lead to another scratch on the face. He could feel blood dribbling down his cheek but adrenaline pumped through his veins, trickling excitement into his burning paws. The black tom smirked and dodged a blow, using his hind paws to propel himself forward into Bumbletongue. The smaller brown warrior grunted as the two tumbled down in a tangle of legs and tails, Batchaser ending up on top and sinking his claws into Bumbletongue's shoulders. The ThunderClanner's eyes flickered with momentary fear before filling with determination. "If you're gonna kill me, do it quickly. This is for my Clan!"

Batchaser rolled his eyes. *Ugh, ThunderClanners...* "No, I'm not killing you," he snapped, tail lashing. He knew Raveneye and Thymeclaw would be coming soon, he needed to run. "But don't even think of chasing after me again. I'm doing my duty to clean up

the mess I created within the Clans, now let me do it peacefully or we'll have a problem."

Bumbletongue curled back his lips and snarled. "I answer only to Doestar, not to some filthy rogue!"

Anger flickered in Batchaser's chest. "I'm not a rogue, you braindead-" But the pawsteps of Bumbletongue's Clanmates were nearing, so he knew he needed to get out fast. "Fine, be ignorant, but just remember that you're getting yourself involved in something far beyond your intelligence." Narrowing his eyes, Batchaser smacked the tom in the face to daze him and ran off. He leapt into the pine trees, letting the thickness carry him down a path, ears buzzing with static and limbs heavy with exhaustion. He hadn't battled another cat in so long, he almost forgot how to. *But I'll improve...*

Batchaser finally stumbled close to a pine, letting the air fill up his lungs and eventually deflate his puffed chest. The black tom lifted his head, looking through the darkness with weary eyes. This part of the forest was foreign to him, perhaps it was because he hadn't been in his home for so many moons... Then a rush of fear struck Batchaser so hard he tensed up completely, breath leaving his jaws. *Where's Rushingpaw?*

He'd almost completely forgotten about the little silver tom, Bumbletongue had taken all of his attention away! *And now he's probably lost somewhere in the forest!* Stifling a growl, Batchaser stalked forward, sniffing the territory and trying to pinpoint a scent. *There's nothing... Ugh.* A twinge of worry was beginning to bother him though. *Even if ShadowClan's scent was stale...that doesn't mean they're not patrolling the remaining area. Rushingpaw wasn't caught, was he?*

"Batchaser? Batchaser, are you here?" A pause. "Batchaser...! *Batchaser*! Where did you go?"

The tom immediately relaxed, eyelids falling, jaw unclenching and tongue dropping from the roof of his mouth. *Stupid little weasel! I'm going to kill him!* Batchaser's anger took over for a moment as he stalked through the foliage, not caring about the ruckus, just caring

about getting his claws on that stupid apprentice. *What was he thinking? We were almost caught! We basically were!*

"I'm here!" Batchaser yelled back when the idiot continued calling his name. There was silence until a streak of silver flashed in the tom's vision and bowled into his side. Stunned, Batchaser looked up and saw it was Rushingpaw, smiling.

"Agh! You stupid little brat, get off of me!" The ShadowClanner batted Rushingpaw off, eyes blazing. "Do you have any idea what you did? We were caught because of your trembling! Now Doestar will never leave the borders alone! Uggghhhh...." Batchaser dropped his head in his paws and groaned. Now everything was going to be so much more difficult.

Rushingpaw flinched, fur bristling. "I-I didn't mean to...!" His eyes were wide and round. "Please don't be mad. I won't do it next time!"

"There may not *be* a next time!" Batchaser snapped. "Especially if you keep at it! Next time you might be the one attacked, and if it's a skillful warrior, you'll stand no chance." He curled his lip. "Clearly your mentor didn't teach you well, maybe even not at all. I mean, a *River*Clan cat *drowning*? I've never heard something more ironic!"

Batchaser couldn't stop the words from tumbling out of his mouth before it was too late. The damage had already been done, and Rushingpaw felt it. The silver tom began to shake and blinked away wet tears, trying to wipe them with his paw. "F-Fine!" he wailed. "If I'm s-so *stupid*, then I'll find my own way home!" He lifted his chin in the air and whipped around, stalking toward RiverClan's border.

Batchaser growled. "Go ahead, you ungrateful little brat!" Red began to speckle the edges of his vision. He was really that mad. "If you die, it's your fault!"

Rushingpaw didn't respond. The black tom flexed his claws in fury, tail lashing back and forth behind him. *Whatever, he'll come back eventually, Rushingpaw needs me. I just need to wait it out and act like I don't care*. But the longer Batchaser waited the more anxious

he grew. The warrior peered into the dark pines, willing the silver apprentice to come running back, but not even the shrubs shivered. He leapt to his paws, fear gripping his heart and closing his throat. *He's not coming back, is he?*

Batchaser began to run. He blindly flew through the tangles of branches and undergrowth, paws numb with guilt and confusion. The shrubs his paws harshly snapped below began to rise to shoulder-height, tickling his nose and underbelly, flowers crunching under his claws. The storm rumbled in the distance, promising a heavy rain that was sure to last for days. The wind seemed to pick up, whipping Batchaser's fur back and stinging his eyes for a moment.

But he wasn't even tired. No hint of exhaustion tugged at his chest to bring him down; in fact, Batchaser felt the exact opposite. Rushes of adrenaline pumped through his veins and prickled his fur, urging him on to find Rushingpaw. *I'm not letting anything happen to him. I already promised Cypressfall.* And thinking about disappointing her was a slippery slope Batchaser didn't dare to climb.

The smell of pine and sap was most noticeable here, but he could see the grass sloping into dips before the river, and the trees dotting RiverClan's landscape farther out. Batchaser gasped out when his back leg caught on a bramble bush. Thorns dug deep into his sensitive skin, spilling trickles of blood and causing him to growl in anger, impatience and annoyance. He didn't have time for this, especially when Rushingpaw's life was possibly in danger. *Because of me*, he reminded himself.

Untangling himself from the bramble vines, Batchaser dug the back of his paws into the ground and scrabbled forward, tail waving behind him and sore feet pounding on the forest floor. But the shadows seemed to dissolve into the hills and he could hear the distant rushing in the distance. *The river.*. Bunching his muscles, Batchaser propelled himself forward and spat away the grass splitting forward in front of him, leaving a winding, flattened trail behind him.

Now, as he neared with the storm in view, crackling in the distance, the black tom stumbled close to the rapids. The sound

filled and muffled his ears, deafening the world around him, taking all his attention and crushing it into spluttering waves. The slope curved into a sharp downward angle, stopping where the white bubbles pattered against the dirt. Sandstone and gravel blanketed the bottom of the river, large piles of rocks jutting slightly out of the surface, slick with droplets of water. Batchaser's paws teetered dangerously over the edge, gaze cast around the area to try and spot Rushingpaw.

There!

Hope leapt into his chest and released as a relieved yowl. The black tom stumbled near the edge of the river, desperately hoping to reach the little silver tom. Rushingpaw was perched on the middle of a fallen log, pelt slicked down from the splashes that would rise up to the bark, covering his paws in a damp coat of darkness from the mix of substances below. Batchaser felt his heart stop for a moment as the apprentice took a shaky step forward, eyes wide with fear. *What in the name of StarClan is he doing?!*

"Rushingpaw!" Batchaser yelled out, stopping at the base of the log. "Stop! Come back! You're not going to make it to the other side!"

The tom twisted his head around, surprise trickling into his sight at recognizing Batchaser. But he stiffened with determination, small rounded ears pricking. "I'm going home," Rushingpaw growled through gritted teeth. "You can't stop me!"

"Just come back, *please*!" A wail rose in Batchaser's throat, scratching the sides and pricking tears into his eyes. *I can't let anything happen to him!* But Rushingpaw ignored him, turning his body around and stepping forward once more. The black tom faltered, unsure of what to do. *I really don't know if I can make it across..*

Every sound seemed to deafen when Rushingpaw slipped, paws dropping out from under him, body crunching the log in half and plummeting into the river. Batchaser didn't move for a moment, shock gripping him in its ugly claws, before he shook himself out of his trance. He looked into the rapids, calculating, considering, but

knew there was no time to think. *I must act now...*

With that in mind, Batchaser leapt forward into the river, coldness seeping into his fur and dragging him down. He gasped in as much air as he could before his head fell under, paws fumbling frantically as his body was swept forward. He opened his dark eyes in the water but it was blurry and it stung, as if his face had been slashed over by another cat. He tried to feel the bottom but it was too deep here, and he could feel himself sinking further and further below. Panic scratched that part of his mind and caused him to unsheathe his claws, attempting to grab hold of *something*, but it was a fruitless attempt. The rapids were too strong.

Just find Rushingpaw, he told himself, chest burning as he held his breath underwater. Bubbles speckled near his vision and his sight began to darken but Batchaser wasn't about to give up. Especially now that he saw Rushingpaw close, figure swirling around as he was caught in a mini tide. Straining his limbs, the black tom slunk his claws into the apprentice's shoulders as he passed, holding him close while continuing to be thrown back and forth across the river. Water entered his gaping jaws and filled his chest; it felt like his lungs were exploding.

At least I have Rushingpaw... but this did little to ease his growing anxiety, spilling over his mind and crushing his hope for life. All he saw in the future was darkness, an impenetrable looming shadow that stood high above him, crunching him below sharp claws and emptying his heart. *It's so easy to die... and I don't know if I can fight it..*

The next few moments were a blur. Batchaser hardly felt like he was in his body anymore, he could only notice the prickles of pain shooting in his chest, choking his throat and causing him to gag under the rapids. He was growing weak and tired, his injured legs giving way from below, pulling him to the rocky ground. His head suddenly bowled into a large stone, a pained yowl leaving his lips. Black spots were becoming more apparent, harder and harder to ignore with the passing seconds. He could feel the gaping wound in the back of his head, undoubtedly spilling blood, but there would be no trace of it, just like there would be no trace of his and Rushingpaw's death.

I failed. I couldn't save him, I couldn't save myself, and I couldn't even save the Clans I destroyed... but I'm so tired.. I just want to sleep. Can't I just sleep? I'll wake up again, I know I will...

Batchaser wasn't so sure, but knew he couldn't move another muscle. He was drowning, nature squeezing him to death and taking him without question, and no one was here to help. *It was my duty...and now I've let everyone down..*

And then he felt it. Sharp claws prickled his body, pulling him up to the surface. He gurgled on the water sloshing in his chest, but air swept over his face, and it was a glorious feeling at last. A dark shape moved beside him, but Batchaser hardly had time to think. He held on to Rushingpaw with his last power and was thrown to the sandy shore, world buzzing before him. It felt like angry bees were swarming in his chest, stinging him from the inside out, not letting him gasp a single breath while doing so. He didn't let himself panic but Batchaser knew he had a low chance of living. *Even if someone had saved him*, it wouldn't matter.

But hopefully Rushingpaw is okay..

A grunt rose up from beside the black tom but he was too exhausted to glance over. *Someone obviously saved us...* But Batchaser couldn't ignore the throbbing cut on the back of his head, a heavy liquid seeping into his pelt and coating him in crimson. His blue eyes flickered down to see the blood pooling around his body, water spluttering out of his mouth as he heaved over the soft grass. Hope was still hard to come by and Batchaser honestly wasn't sure if he could last any longer. He just wanted to close his eyes and sleep, but knew that would result in immediate death.

But it feels so good... I can feel it tugging at me..

"You should be thankful I saved you," a sharp voice grumbled, and Batchaser saw the dark shape standing over him. Yellow eyes glowed like a rising sun, gleaming over the land and reflecting off of the morning dew. "Applestar won't be happy to have unexpected guests, but I suppose you were found half-drowned. Perhaps he'll be kind."

The weight was lifted off of Batchaser as the mystery cat threw him onto his shoulders, grabbing a silver blur form the side in his jaws. *Rushingpaw...?* But everything was becoming so hard to handle. His mind dreamt of the warmth of sleep, and Batchaser couldn't be happier to let the numbness overtake him. *But is it right? What if I* do *die?* Somehow, it didn't seem so terrifying. *At least then Rushingpaw will be back in his home Clan and with his family...unlike him, I have nothing to lose. And I suppose that's a good thing...*

He breathed out, shadows burning at the edges of his vision, filling his mind with darkness as he fell into a dreamless sleep.

A/N: I don't have much to say here other than this chapter was really fun to write! But keep looking forward to more interactions... ;)

Can anyone guess who saved them? And where are they heading now? Will the main gang be okay?? Please leave your theories and ideas down below! I'd love to hear them!

Anyway, that's about it! Thank you for reading; please vote and comment your thoughts, and may StarClan light your path!

Chapter 34 || The Storm Begins

[image]

• Y'all. Look at our new cover. Isn't it beautiful? I'm literally IN LOVE. Dreaming-roses on DeviantArt was such a cutie and allowed me to commission the new cover! I hope you all like it, please give her some well-deserved love :)

Now, on to the chapter! •

The darkness was excruciating. It suffocated Batchaser like a heavy black blanket, seeping into his lungs, trickling into his insides as if he were dead weight. The river flashed in his mind, its cruel waves lapping over his head and pulling him under into the abyss, leaving no room for breath or another thought.

Panic clawed at his chest, filling up into his throat. Everything was a mess of tangled shadows, only gray lights flickering through the holes every now and then. He could feel his slicked fur drizzle with... what was it, rain? Though for a moment anxiety swirled through him and Batchaser wasn't sure if he'd even escaped from the river.

No, that's impossible... He would have breathed a sigh of relief to hear his own thoughts, but the black tom still felt like he was drowning, back in those horrible rapids, caught in the torrent..

Pain. It gripped Batchaser in its pointed claws and picked away at his soul, turning his mind to mud. It felt like pine needles prickling in his pink skin, dipping away every shred of bravery and determination he'd tried to muster. The feelings in his chest stirred and returned to his throat. He choked, the coldness returning, gripping him harshly and plucking open his mouth. He tried to flinch away from the touch but it was too late, he had no more energy in his broken body to do so.

The darkness filled up his mind and soured his tongue, flowing out of his jaws and leaving his body. It almost felt like he could

breathe again.

"That's it. Let it all out." A low but brittle voice shook around in his head and he groaned, trying to lap up any breath he could get. Batchaser wasn't sure where he was and- honestly, right now, didn't really care.

"Mmm. I think you'll be okay." The warmth fizzled away until he was left shivering and cold, teeth clattering together. Pawsteps moved near his body. "Try to sleep. Applestar will see you once you've woken."

And sleep he did. Shafts of light broke through his dreams, shimmering the world in a bright rainbow that danced over his eyes. He could see Lynxbite; her eyes, her scent, her touch, her- her everything. He missed her so much.

Then, the waves swept him away. They swept Lynxbite away. He choked on his breath and tried to reach for her, tried to find her eyes again, but they'd disappeared. He could see a hazy vision of kits, and his heart twisted painfully in his chest. Were those his kits?

They began to fade away, too. Batchaser cried out for them but his limbs wouldn't move, and suddenly his legs buckled under him, and the bright sunlight finally broke through his consciousness. Batchaser felt the dream slip through his claws as reality came forward. He breathed out softly, keeping his eyes closed and listening to the patter of pawsteps around him.

Two sets of pawsteps, actually.

"Is he awake?"

"Yes. He's pretending to sleep so he can listen in on our conversation."

"Am not." Batchaser grumbled and pulled himself from the luxurious darkness, eyes squinting against the streaming sunlight. A huge honey-ginger tom stood before him, swirls of orange and white pattering over his fur. His green eyes narrowed at the

ShadowClan tom, bushy tail swishing around his paws as he sat.

"My point exactly." Timberfall shouldered his way past the large ton and left the two alone. The silence buzzed in Batchaser's ears.

"So." The honey-colored tom stared at Batchaser. "Tell me, how did you happen to half-drown yourself with one of RiverClan's dead kits clutched in your paws?"

"He's an apprentice," Batchaser spat. "Obviously you'd know that if—"

Wait. Does this cat know..?

The other tom twitched his tail. "Yes, you see, that's the thing. Rushingkit should be *dead*. And as I hear your name, you should be, too."

"I didn't tell you my name."

"You didn't need to. Rushingkit was crying your name all night."

"Rushingpaw, it's Rushing*paw*—"

The tom bared his fangs. "Quiet!" The command flooded Batchaser's senses, and for once, he realized that he was vulnerable now. He was in the real world, and he could be killed, and so could his friends. So, for once in his life, Batchaser hushed.

For now.

"I don't know what this kit has told you, but that's just what he is. Rushingkit is not an apprentice. He never was." The tom shifted and sighed. "A moon before his apprenticeship he snuck out of camp with his sister. He fell in the river and was unable to be saved. He was *gone*. So now, what I need to know is why *you* — an annoying, worthless ShadowClan warrior — are here and what you were doing with my Clanmate."

Batchaser was town down with guilt. It shredded his heart and pounded in his ears, a heavy throb that wouldn't cease. "No," he whispered softly.

"Yes," the tom growled. "But you didn't answer my question."

He groaned, covering his eyes with his paws. "No, no, no," he whispered. "What have I done? I've broken him. He's just a kit. I was so *mean* —"

"I don't care!" The golden tom's claws sunk into the brown earth beneath. "If you really feel that bad, then you can talk to him later. But right now I need you to be responsive or I'm going to have to send you away. Why are you here? And is it possible that you've caught the Blue Death?"

Batchaser peeked through his paws. "Tell me your name, and maybe I'll comply."

"Answer my questions and maybe I won't send you back to StarClan."

"Low blow," he grunted, shifting weight to his elbows to hold himself up. This tom was much larger and also seemed to hold an aura of importance. Perhaps this was RiverClan's leader Batchaser was talking to; he'd never cared much in StarClan.

The tom shook his head. "Applestar," he introduced, flicking an ear. "Now."

So I was right. Great. Batchaser sighed and looked around. "Oh, you know. I'm here on a little mission, saving the Clans and all that."

Applestar didn't say anything.

"I was *coming* to deliver Rushingpaw— err, Rushingkit— so he would stay out of harm's way while we uh.. handled things."

The leader blinked. "And?"

"And.. it's StarClan business buddy, sorry, *very* exclusive —"

"No —" Applestar groaned and dragged a paw over his face. "Blue Death! Do you have the Blue Death?"

Batchaser made a face. "No?"

He blew out softly. "Oh, thank StarClan."

"What exactly *is* the Blue Death?"

Applestar's gaze hardened and his broad shoulders tensed. "It's a sickness that took many of my Clanmates," he said somberly. "It's the reason we moved. The river seemed to hold the disease and we were forced to evacuate. But what is RiverClan without our home? Without the *river*? We are struggling here, and we need help. Perhaps our omen was of good fortune.." The tom's eyes widened. "Wait. *Bat*chaser. That's your name, correct?"

Brimming with shock from knowing why RiverClan had moved camps, Batchaser slowly nodded. "Yes? What — what omen, though?"

"Timberfall... he witnessed something last moon." Applestar shifted on his paws and glanced around.

"..Yes?" Batchaser prompted impatiently.

The huge tom blew out. "It was night, and the rain was like a torrent. He stood near the mouth of the cave and spotted a lone bat fluttering in the sky.."

He blinked. "Is that supposed to mean something?"

"Of course! StarClan sent us a message — it was telling us that *you* were to be our savior."

Batchaser tilted his head to the side. "Yeaaah, but did it really? One," he flexed his claws, "StarClan isn't exactly being... communicative right now, and even if they were, we aren't on great terms. Two, they wouldn't send a sign to *RiverClan*, because they simply don't care that much. And three, just because you saw a bat doesn't mean I'm going to save anyone. In fact, it doesn't mean anything."

Applestar's bushy tail twitched. "How do you know? It could have meant something. You have to admit, it's an odd coincidence."

Batchaser scrunched up his nose. "Yeah, and me seeing an apple fall from a tree doesn't mean you're going to.. cause the downfall of your Clan or something."

His eyes widened. "You saw that?"

"No — ugh.." Batchaser shook his head and turned away. "That's not the point. The point is that you seeing an animal I was named after means nothing."

Applestar furrowed his brows. "You're a StarClan cat. Isn't it your job to support the dead? To support the idea that every message is from StarClan?"

"But not every message *is* from StarClan!" Batchaser hissed, flexing his claws. "You Clan cats are so caught up in your stupid drama that you don't even realize StarClan —" He stopped. *You don't even realize StarClan isn't watching anymore*.

Applestar peeled back his lips. "What were you going to say?"

"Nothing."

"That's a lie."

"It's none of your business!" Batchaser fixed the tom with an icy glare.

A growl rumbled in the ginger tom's throat. "Just because you're a StarClan cat doesn't mean I immediately like you. I remember you, moons and moons ago, when I was just an apprentice. You were wailing about how ShadowClan was the most important, how *your* Clan should take over more territory. You sparked a lifelong war without even realizing it!"

I did more than that, he wanted to say, but the words wouldn't come out. They were lodged in his throat and he felt his chest constrict again. *I don't want to think about that anymore*. And if Batchaser was good at anything, it was ignoring his problems.

"I know what I did," Batchaser finally huffed in response, ears flicking back. "It's no secret that I was ambitious for ShadowClan's

rule. But I'm a changed cat. I don't think like that anymore." In fact, his mind had hardly wandered to the thought of ShadowClan since he'd been back in the Clans. It was weird. He didn't feel such a strong pull anymore. But now that he spoke about it... he remembered the pines, the morning dew, the thick needles strewn over the ground, the shadows swathed along the earth..

The tom looked back up at Applestar, who was staring at him intently. "Look, whatever you think of me, it doesn't matter. I only came here to drop Rushing... Rushingkit off."

The leader bristled. "But what about RiverClan? We're dying of sickness. We're weak from the ongoing war, and we have a limited amount of supplies. Aren't you meant to help us?!"

"StarClan cats have never done anything themselves," a low voice said from outside the cave. A large, well-muscled brown tom stepped inside, shadows blanketing his brown fur. Batchaser recognized those yellow eyes. *Wait...*

"You're the one that saved me. From the river." Batchaser tried to move forward and groaned when the ache trembled through his body.

"I am." The tom's eyes glinted.

Applestar ignored his Clanmate. "You still haven't answered my question," he hissed. "You're here to help us, right?"

"Why would a StarClan cat care about *RiverClan*?" the warrior sneered.

"Beavertooth," Applestar warned.

"No. We all know it's true." The brown tom glared back at Batchaser. "You dead cats only care about one thing — ThunderClan. You always have, and you always will. Nothing has changed, even if you really are here."

"Well, genius, I *am* here. And I'm thankful you saved me and all that, but you're really starting to get on my nerves and that's never good. As for *you*." Batchaser turned his head toward Applestar. "My

priority is not RiverClan right now."

The golden leader stiffened, eyes dimming into a cold, dark storm. "Of course," he finally snapped, voice clipped. "Beavertooth is right. Why would I expect anything from a StarClan cat?"

Batchaser twitched an ear. *Blah blah blah, I need to get out of here..*

"You will leave RiverClan in two days." Applestar turned away. "I expect you to be gone, and I never want to lay eyes on you again."

"That's a little melodramatic.." The black tom grunted and rolled his eyes. "Whatever. I'll *happily* be out of your fur sooner than you can blink."

Applestar didn't respond and ducked out of the den, Beavertooth following closely behind. Batchaser watched them leave, grunting and facing towards the wall of the cave. Hopefully I'm not hurt for too long. *The sooner I can get out of here, the sooner I can fix my mistakes.*. Batchaser ground his teeth together and lightly touched the top of his head. Pain jerked him forward and he groaned, doubling over. *Ouch... I forgot how much it* sucks *being mortal.*

Batchaser watched the light fade from the clouds gathered above, night trickling into the sky and swallowing everything in navy and black. The black tom felt the tug of exhaustion pull at his eyelids and he laid his head down, breathing out and allowing himself one night of sleep before the chaos began.

And chaos would begin very soon.

•••••••

The flashes of lightning and crashes of thunder are what first woke Batchaser. He jolted awake, blue eyes wide and reflecting the downpour of rain. Water puddled at his feet, trickling down the trees and turning the camp to mud. Batchaser watched the ripple of electricity span across the clouds, and for once, wished he was back in StarClan. It never rained *there.*

To be honest, he'd always hated rain, hated that it always

seemed to bring something bad along with it... The day after Lynxbite had died, it had rained. The day he'd found his mother dead, it began to rain. Batchaser wasn't looking forward to the rest of the moon, and to be honest, was already tired. He wasn't used to being hurt. Even in the Forgotten Eternity, he'd had his smarts... down here, he felt dumber than ever.

He heard soft pawsteps rounding his body and lifted his gaze to Timberfall, whose expression didn't flicker from a disinterested frown. "I need to check your wounds."

Batchaser tilted his body towards the medicine cat, wincing when his head was touched. "Careful," he snapped.

"Stop whining." Timberfall ran his paws down Batchaser's flank, brows furrowing. "This evaluation is needed to see if you're ready to leave RiverClan in the next two days."

"I know," Batchaser growled, "I'm not deaf. Applestar has already told me this."

Timberfall didn't react, instead turning and disappearing into the darkness of the den. A few moments later, he returned carrying several herbs in his jaws. "Your head wound is swelling, so is more liable to become infected. I'll need to apply these herbs. The more you squirm, the more it will hurt." He laid down the herbs and nudged poppy seeds to Batchaser. "Eat these."

Batchaser scoffed. "What, you think I can't handle a little pain? I'm fine."

"Suit yourself." The medicine cat shrugged and roughly angled Batchaser's head toward his paws, applying chervil root, feverfew, and nettle leaves.

Batchaser tore himself out of Timberfall's grasp when he was finished. "You sure like to hurt others, being a medicine cat and all."

"You sure like to complain a lot, being a StarClan cat and all." Timberfall tilted his head to the side and eyed Batchaser. "You never did tell me what you were doing here, anyway."

The black tom made a face. "Are you stupid? I already told you I was dropping Rushingkit off so I could-"

"No," he interrupted. "I mean, what are you doing in the *real world*? No StarClan cat has ever taken problems into their own paws before. And no offense, but you don't seem to be the type of cat that would like to be considered a hero."

Batchaser twitched an ear. "I'm fixing a problem I caused," he said slowly. "And I'm not even sure how to return home. I wasn't actually meaning to return here.."

Timberfall appeared to be surprised. "How does that work?"

"It's a long story, but — well, after I died in StarClan, I was taken to this... *place*... called the Forgotten Eternity. I traveled with two other cats and made it through the challenges." Batchaser sighed. "I was hoping to be returned to StarClan, but alas, we were transported back into *this* mess."

"'We?'" Timberfall echoed.

"My... acquantainces." Batchaser was entirely sure Jackalstar would disapprove of spilling their journey to a mere medicine cat, but found he didn't care. "We're planning to save the Clans, but to do that, we need every cat's help."

Timberfall was silent for a moment before he nodded. "I will always support StarClan," he vowed, "even if I find myself disliking you."

He laughed. "I've heard that one before. Thanks for the, uh... support."

The medicine cat gave the smallest hint of a small smile. "Of course." Timberfall focused on something behind Batchaser and froze. "Oh. I will... leave you to it."

Batchaser raised a brow. "What are you talking about-" But stopped when he saw what Timberfall had meant. Well — not a what, but a *who*.

Rushingkit stood, drenched in the rain, and began to cry. He ran toward Batchaser, jumping into his paws and nuzzling into his neck fur. "Batchaser," he sobbed, squeezing the life out of him. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you."

Batchaser relaxed immediately, exhaling and patting the kit's head. "Don't be sorry. You didn't do anything wrong. But.."

Rushingkit leaned back, staring at Batchaser with wide eyes. "Do you know?" he whispered.

Batchaser was pretty sure he knew what Rushingkit was talking about. "Yes," he admitted, chest pooling with dread at the kit's shocked and guilt-ridden gaze. "But don't be sorry. It's fine. I get it, I... I do. How is it, seeing your old Clanmates?"

Rushingkit bit his lip. "Weird... but I get to see my sisters! Which is awesome. Of course, mama isn't here anymore, but my papa is so happy to see me!" Batchaser smiled at the way the kit's eyes lit up with every word.

"That's awesome," the warrior chuckled, wondering what had happened to Rushingkit's mother. "What are your sisters' names?"

"Whisperpaw and Bushpaw," Rushingkit said proudly, raising his chin and puffing out his chest. "They're apprentices! Isn't that amazing?! Soon *I'll* be an apprentice!"

If only... Batchaser thought, but smiled through the pain. "I'm so proud of you. You've made it a long way. No other kits your age would have been as strong as you have.." He trailed off, concerned when the kit began crying again. "Hey, why are you crying? Please don't. I don't know how to..."

"You're my best friend," Rushingkit spluttered. Batchaser's heart melted and froze with shame at the same time. He'd treated the kit so badly. "I don't want you to leave."

"We can still see each other in dreams," Batchaser assured him, "and we'll still be in the Clans. We'll just... you know, be saving them at the same time. No big deal, right?"

Rushingkit sniffled, wiping away the tears, attempting to beam. "Yeah..! You'll go down in history! My best friend, being adored by all the Clans! I'm so happy for you!"

Batchaser himself felt like he was about to break down. "Oh, stop your flattering," he joked. Rushingkit turned when a patrol walked in. A medium-sized black she-cat and a small brown tabby she-cat walked by the den, fresh kill stuffed in their jaws. Batchaser followed the kit's gaze. "Are those your sisters?"

Rushingkit smiled. "Yeah."

"You can go out to see them, if you want," Batchaser offered, curling his tail around the kit's back. "I don't mind."

"Are you sure?" he whispered. "I don't want to leave you alone.."

The black tom grunted. "I'll be fine. Your sisters are more important. Trust me. Spend as much time with them as you can."

Rushingkit buried his muzzle into Batchaser's chest, breathing in his scent. "I love you. I'll, I'll come visit later!"

Batchaser wanted to cry. Why was this kit so sweet to him, after all he'd done and said? After he'd abused him? "I -" His voice stuck in his throat. He couldn't say those words. "See you, Rushingkit."

He watched Rushingkit waddle off and run up to his sisters. Batchaser exhaled and laid his head on his paws, exhaustion tugging at his eyelids. When he awoke again, the rain was sweeping through the tendril hung over the den, spitting his face with water droplets. "'M awake," he drawled, trying to pry open his slitted eyes. "Only just... closed my eyes.."

A shrill voice shakes Batchaser away from his sleep, ears pricking and claws flicking in and out of their sheaths. A large white she-cat rushes into the den, and to his surprise, is dragging a smaller, pure black, long-furred tom by the scruff. "You're slower than leaf-bare!" she hissed. "Now, clean this mess up. Timberfall's been out for ages. StarClan only knows what he's doing!" Her face rested on a scowl when the tom didn't move. "Are you deaf,

Beetlepaw? Huh? Did I not just tell you to *get moving*?"

"Yes, Pearlsnap," the apprentice mumbled, dragging his paws over to the herb storage and beginning to pick out the dead and rotten ones.

Batchaser snorted and eyed the white she-cat, who shot the ShadowClanner a glare. "What are you looking at?"

He just rolled his eyes and turned his head away, shifting his body so he wasn't facing her.

"Hey!" She stomped up and snarled over him. "I asked you a question."

Anger pulsed beneath his claws. Batchaser whipped around, gazing into her fiery gray eyes, narrowing his own blue ones. "And I decided not to answer," he spat.

Pearlsnap looked a little taken aback, but quickly resumed her defiant posture. "Suit yourself," she said in a low tone, whipping around and smacking Batchaser in the face with her tail. He sighed and allowed her to walk away without rebuttal, nose twitching.

He almost jumped when Beetlepaw began to mutter under his breath. He'd completely forgotten about the apprentice. "I'm not even a medicine cat..!" he growled to himself. "Who does she think she is? Bullying everyone, acting like she's our leader?"

"You don't sound too happy," Batchaser said, amused, raising a brow when Beetlepaw swiveled around.

"Sorry," he immediately apologized. "I didn't mean to wake you, I -"

"I was just taking to Pearlsnap. Did you not hear me?"

Beetlepaw's ear-tips flushed red. "No," he admitted softly. "Sorry. I tend to block things out."

Batchaser chuckled. "It's fine." He winced when a particularly bad headache began to pound in his mind. "You're Beetlepaw, eh?

Who's the she-devil?" He jerked his head to where Pearlsnap was yelling at some other apprentices near the fresh-kill-pile.

The black tom eyed Batchaser suspiciously.

"Don't worry. I'm not going to tell." Batchaser winked.

Beetlepaw visibly relaxed, shoulders slacking and a lazy smile sparking on his lips. "That's Pearlsnap - our deputy."

Batchaser's eyes widened. "Your *deputy* talks to you like that?"

He shrugged, turning back to the herbs in a huff. "Yeah. Applestar lets her do whatever she wants. It's fine."

"Hmm.." Batchaser tapped his claw on the ground and tilted his head. "You're not a medicine cat apprentice though, are you?"

"No."

"So what are you doing in here, then?"

Beetlepaw scowled. "I missed two birds while hunting. But it's not like Pearlsnap could've caught them! Ugh.."

Batchaser thought back to Bearmask. Pearlsnap reminded him of his old mentor, except... the deputy was still much calmer. A lot less cruel. A lot less *violent*. The scars under his fur had healed from the brutal training, but Batchaser's fiery hate for Bearmask would never quench. He blinked slowly. "I get that," he finally said, ignoring the anger burning in his chest. He attempted to smooth down his bristling fur and smirked again. "But I guess we didn't really have any birds in ShadowClan territory. Mostly just the occasional mice, lizards, toads..."

Beetlepaw's eyes widened. "Wait - you're..?" He looked horrified. "We... we're in a *war* with your Clan. Oh, no. I'm in so much trouble. I shouldn't have said anything about Pearlsnap!"

The black tom realized that what he'd said was wrong. No one knew he was ShadowClan, except Applestar - and he clearly hadn't deemed it important enough to tell the Clan. "No, no," he tried to

soothe. "I'm not - I'm not a part of ShadowClan anymore..." His voice trailed off.

Beetlepaw lashed his tail. "What do you mean? You just said..." His eyes flashed. "Wait. You said 'we didn't.' Past tense. Are you - were you exiled, or something?"

"No." Batchaser ducked his head. "Look. I'm probably not supposed to be telling you this, but, well..." He bit his lip. "I died, many moons ago. I was killed in a battle between ShadowClan and ThunderClan. And, and I went to StarClan, and went through a lot of trouble to get back to the living world. I wasn't exiled. But I'm not sure many even remember me, except your leader."

"Applestar knows?" Beetlepaw's voice dripped with shock and curiosity. Batchaser expected to be ridiculed, to not be believed, yet.. "I guess I believe you, then." The apprentice smiled. "I'm sorry you died and stuff... but hopefully your second chance here can be lived better." He tipped his head to the side. "Why *are* you here?"

"Oh, y'know.." Batchaser chuckled. "Just saving the Clans. No big deal." *So this cat doesn't know anything... thus, I can assume his Clanmates think I'm just a ShadowClan prisoner. But they must know Rushingkit, right? Maybe it's just Beetlepaw that didn't realize. He's young, most likely wasn't sure who Rushingkit was, and figured he was with me. I guess that makes sense... maybe..*

"I'll support you, then," Beetlepaw vowed, dipping his head. "Always. I hope RiverClan is on StarClan's side as well."

Batchaser couldn't help but smile widely. "Well -"

A shriek across camp caused both toms to stiffen. They glanced at each other before Beetlepaw rushed out without a word. Batchaser dragged himself after the apprentice, squinting through the heavy downpour. A brown tabby she-cat was standing in the middle of the clearing, Timberfall still under her paws.

"Look at him!" she yowled. "My brother is dying! He's *dying*!"

All of the cats crowded around flinched, trying to understand

what's happening. Applestar ran forward, eyes wide. And then those words... those haunting words that made Batchaser's heart stop in his chest..

"He's caught the Blue Death!"

A/N: Sorry it's been so long guys! I know, four months... but a lot has been going on and I've finally found some motivation to write! So, I hope you enjoyed the chapter.

Please vote and comment your thoughts, and may StarClan light your path!

Chapter 35 || Blue Death

Batchaser stood still, eyes wide and body shaking with apprehension. The wails of cats around him echoed in his ears, tearing away his sanity for one small moment. He squinted through the rain pelting down, realizing that he was being herded toward the medicine cat den with Beetlepaw.

Once inside, the air grew stuffy and Batchaser nearly choked on the terror and horror radiating from every RiverClan cat. He briefly glanced over at Pearlsnap, who was yelling at Beetlepaw. "Fix him! Come on! Do something!"

"Please." The medicine cat's sister was standing over him, tears dripping down her cheeks. "Please, you can't leave me. I've lost everyone. Please, Timberfall.."

More began to crowd around the unmoving body and Batchaser's ears flicked back. *This isn't good. I was planning to leave today, yet it seems they may need my help...* He wasn't very skilled in medicine, only having learned a little bit from his mentor during his apprenticeship, but he knew the basics. He could do this. He could do this.

But *without* all the noise.

"Pearlsnap." Batchaser swiveled his head to the she-cat, who blinked gray eyes back at him. "Get everyone out. I need some quiet if I'm going to do anything."

Timberfall suddenly began to convulse, paws shaking and eyes slicking over, looking pale as the morning clouds. He began foaming at the mouth and Pearlsnap stared, petrified.

"Pearlsnap!" Batchaser yelled, snapping the deputy out of her trance. "Out! Come on! Hurry it up!"

She obeyed and quickly shoved everyone out of the den.

Applestar shouldered past her, green eyes wide and dark. "You weren't a medicine cat, were you?"

"No," Batchaser admitted, "but I'm the closest you've got to a medicine cat."

Applestar hesitated. "I... okay, I'll leave you to it." He quickly turned tail and left the den, tail streaking out behind him.

Beetlepaw shifted to follow, but Batchaser held out a paw in front of him. "You stay with me."

"*Me*?" he asked incredulously. "I'm not a medicine cat.."

"Neither am I." Batchaser huffed, turning his gaze toward Timberfall. "But I need assistance. You're small and agile. Please. Help me out here."

Beetlepaw blinked and eventually dipped his head. "Of course, Batchaser. What can I do?"

He swallowed thickly, flinching when thunder crackled over their heads. "Okay. Okay, I've got this." Batchaser quickly grabbed a hold of his nest, reckoning that it was clean enough, and propped it under Timberfall's head. The foam was dripping down the medicine cat's chin, beads of white trickling onto his chestnut fur. "Hurry. Get a ball of moss from the back of the den."

Beetlepaw sped off, the breeze brushing Batchaser's fur. He placed his paws on Timberfall's shoulders and pushed him to the side, facing the outside of the den, hoping that he could empty out whatever else was in his stomach. Beetlepaw picked his way back to the mouth of the cave, sticking the wad of moss outside and letting the water soak it.

Before he could paw it over to Batchaser, Timberfall gurgled and vomited all over the floor. His chest heaved with each choke and his glazed eyes flickered open, tears involuntarily streaking down his cheeks. Beetlepaw's claws sunk into the ground, scrunching his nose. The rain was quick to wash it away, and with a few more extra moss balls, Batchaser had successfully cleaned it up. Disposing

the moss, he eyed the medicine storage and sighed.

"Poppy seeds." The raspy voice startled Batchaser and he whipped around, eyes widening. Timberfall was attempting to stand, paws shaking under his weight.

"Don't stand," Batchaser said quickly, rushing over. Beetlepaw's tail flicked over the medicine cat's back. "I'll get you poppy seeds. What else?"

Timberfall shook his head and collapsed back in the nest, unable to speak. Batchaser didn't have to say anything — Beetlepaw has already brought two poppy seeds over. He nosed them to the medicine cat and Timberfall weakly lapped them up, exhaling.

Batchaser watched as Timberfall tucked himself into the nest and he figured he was okay for now. Not like he actually knew how to do anything else, anyway. Batchaser gave a small nod to Beetlepaw, who scampered to the fresh-kill-pile, fishing out a small bird and running to the apprentices' den.

Batchaser seated himself under an overhang right outside of the den, tendrils hanging down and tickling his head. He grunted and ducked away, ears flicking back droplets of water falling from the murky gray sky. Threads of dark gray split through the clouds, lightning flickering in zigzags far above. Batchaser hoped this storm wouldn't last long — he imagined the river would be impossible to cross now, due to the sheer intensity of rain that had already fallen, and that meant more time in *RiverClan*. He was by no means a water cat, already disliked Applestar and Pearlsnap, and found himself readier than ever to leave Rushingkit so he could get down to business.

Unfortunately, mother nature didn't seem willing to comply to his wishes.

After a long beat of silence, thunder rumbled again and the pounding of pawsteps in the mud broke Batchaser from his trance. Pearlsnap was making her way over, eyes narrowed and claws unsheathed.

Oh, great... Batchaser rolled his eyes and turned his head to the side, watching the deputy's every move as she came to stand beside him. "Look, I'm not a medicine cat. I never was. But I did what I thought was best, and you can at least be grateful for that."

Pearlsnap eyed Batchaser, looking at the dark shape slumped in the den. "How is he, then?"

"He's alive." Batchaser watched the mud ooze through his toes as he pushed his paws into the ground.

"Is it... the Blue Death?" Pearlsnap sounded unsure and even — dare he say it? — scared. For someone that worked so hard to act tough and mean, she was sure cracking under the pressure of a vital Clanmate's health.

Batchaser craned his neck up to the sky, wishing to return back home — to *StarClan*. "I'm not even sure what the Blue Death is. Applestar only briefly explained it."

Pearlsnap shifted on her paws beside him, sitting down slowly. Her voice grew soft and somber. "It's a disease that hit us hard in the old camp. We'd noticed the river had become brown and murky, and when I was sent to check it out, one of our apprentices drank the water." Her eyes darkened. "She died two days later."

Batchaser narrowed his eyes in thought. "But surely Timberfall wouldn't have drank from the river after that happened?"

"It spreads quickly," Pearlsnap murmured. "If he went anywhere near the old camp, then he most likely caught it from there. Timberfall isn't stupid, but he puts his Clan before himself. Perhaps he was trying to accomplish something by going back.."

The black tom sighed, the spray of rain cooling him down. "And the symptoms..?"

Pearlsnap bristled. "It always started with seizures. Some would live a few days, but their mouths would foam up so horribly that they couldn't breathe. We couldn't feed them or make them drink clean water. It was a terrible time."

Unsure of what to say, Batchaser only nodded. "I see." He stared past her, looking toward the camp entrance, and wondered if he could make it to the camp and back without catching the Blue Death. It was a risk, but he needed to check it out. The whole thing just didn't make sense. *I'll have to check it out later, but for now...*

He stood to his paws, ignoring the mud caked on his midnight fur. "I'm going to take a nap. You have to promise me that when I'm gone, you'll make sure he isn't crowded." Out of the corner of his eye he saw Cloverpetal pacing in and out of the warriors' den. Batchaser jerked his head toward the she-cat. "Especially his sister. She can visit him and stay with him, but don't let her freak out. That's the last thing Timberfall needs."

"Of course," Pearlsnap said quickly, rising to her paws. "I can go talk to her, if you'd like."

"Okay." Batchaser nodded to her and paused, a smile flickering on his lips. "I like you better this way. Don't be such a grump." *Like I'm one to talk, but it really is nice seeing another side to every cat down here.*

Pearlsnap rolled her eyes. "Whatever," she huffed, but there was a sprinkle of amusement somewhere in there. "Sleep well, Batchaser."

Without another word, the black tom turned and padded into the den. He glanced at Timberfall, who was sleeping soundly, and decided he could use some rest as well before he went along with his plan. Exhaling, Batchaser flopped into the medicine cat's old nest near the back of the den and rubbed his back against the bristles of the weeds. He stared at the ceiling and briefly wondered what was going on in StarClan right now. If only he could be back home..

The past four days had not only been hectic, but had been so stressful for Batchaser that he hadn't actually had any time to go explore RiverClan's old camp and see what he could find.

Nowadays, he really only slept and watched over Timberfall. *When did I become this cat's caretaker?* he hissed to himself, but promptly realized that if not for him, the Clans wouldn't have been in a war, and thus another medicine cat could've come to help. Every fault always led back to him. It sucked, but Batchaser could accept it.

Timberfall had suffered another seizure, though this one had been less extreme than the first. The vomit was easier to clean up, and he'd mostly been dry-heaving by the time Batchaser had awoken. The poppy seeds seemed to be working — y'know, Timberfall wasn't *dead* yet — and both he and Beetlepaw could force feed the medicine cat what they needed to. Fish would've been easier, but without the river, that was impossible.

The storm had thinned out, but there were still showers of rain every now and then with the sun peeking through the clouds. Batchaser rose drearily from his nest, gazing out at the light spilling over the camp. It was a nice, cool day today, and he figured this was his best chance to leave.

Batchaser rolled his shoulders forward and opened his jaws into a yawn, stopping to check on Timberfall before heading out. Beetlepaw came running up from the apprentices' den. "Hi, Batchaser. Pearlsnap said you might need me today."

He and Pearlsnap had been keeping each other company for the past few days. Last night, Batchaser had told the deputy that he needed Beetlepaw to watch over Timberfall while he found the old camp and figured out what was going on with the river. He'd grown quite fond of Beetlepaw, actually. He was quiet but had a fiery determination inside that he really respected. Despite not being a medicine cat, he knew more about herbs than most other warriors did. That was really helpful to their case.

"Hey," Batchaser greeted, scratching his ear with his back paw. "I need you to watch over Timberfall for a while. I'll be back later."

Beetlepaw nodded slowly. That's another thing Batchaser liked about Beetlepaw. He didn't ask many questions. He was the silent accepting type.

"What, you have more important things to do with your time?" Beavertooth sneered, walking over from where'd he'd been listening in by the fresh-kill-pile.

"What, do you not have more important things to do than fatty up?" Batchaser snapped back, tail lashing. Despite being saved by him, his patience was on a thin line with Beavertooth.

The large brown tom bristled, yellow eyes flashing into a formidable glare. "Watch it, kid. You're not a StarClan cat anymore." His claws unsheathed.

Batchaser glanced down at the threat. "I wouldn't do that, if I were you."

Beavertooth stared at him for a long while before his white claws slipped back into his paws. "You're not a RiverClan cat, so don't start acting like one." He bared his teeth and whipped around, stalking out of camp.

Batchaser shook his head and sighed, tilting his head toward a confused Beetlepaw. "Don't worry about it," the black tom assured. "It's nothing. Just make sure Timberfall is okay."

The apprentice breathed out. "Gotcha." He slipped past Batchaser and entered the medicine den, blanketed by writhing shadows. Batchaser wasted no time and made his way out of the camp, following a winding trail through the forest. Pearlsnap had given him directions, but it had been moons since he'd actually lived. He really didn't remember where all of the Clan camps were.

The tread was nice, though. Despite the undergrowth trickling over the path and the sticks littered all over the forest floor, Batchaser took comfort in the familiar feeling in the air. Life. He could hear birds chattering, a quiet stream somewhere farther off in the distance, and the scuttling of mice in the bushes every now and then. It was different from StarClan. Batchaser didn't realize how much he'd missed it until now. Not being out of camp for days had really affected him negatively. Now...he finally felt free.

Batchaser found himself nearing an overhang of dripping wet

branches, the leaves flicking water droplets onto his head. He squinted his eyes and shivered, ducking his head and crawling through a small space. When he poked his head out, all of the noises of the forest died away.

The black tom scrabbled out of the space and twitched the dirt off of his body. He was standing at the edge of the camp, brows furrowed. Apprehension tightened in his belly and Batchaser slid forward, uneasily glancing around the old RiverClan camp. He could feel the thickness here — like all of their grief and terror had been left behind in this very spot. The drowning out of the forest spooked him more than he'd like to admit, but as he neared the camp entrance and heard the roar of the river, he figured that must have been why... right?

Batchaser looked down and was mildly surprised to see a set of pawsteps leading into the medicine den. He gaped for a moment before pushing his paws forward, shouldering his way through the vines covering the mouth of the cave. His eyes adjusted to the darkness and he spotted a pile of dried and rotten herbs in the corner. Batchaser scrunched his nose up, padding forward and poking them with his claw. *Was Timberfall here? If so, why would he be trying to gather dead herbs? Maybe it's some that we don't have in the store.. I'll have to check when I return ho—*

He'd almost said *home*. Batchaser grit his teeth together and whipped his tail back and forth, turning and stalking out of the den. He began to think of how he'd acted the past few days. *I've let these cats grow close to me, and now I'm subconsciously calling RiverClan home. This isn't good. I dropped my guard, and now I'm vulnerable*. The tom sighed heftily. *I need to go back to being mean old Batchaser... that's who I am. That's who I've been for longer than the old me*. The grumpier he was, the more cats would stay away from him. That was best for everyone..

Batchaser lost himself in thought for a moment before a horrible stench filled his senses. He nearly gagged and doubled over, stricken at the dreadful smell. *What in the world..?* He ran out of camp and jumped through the bushes, swaying between the thinning forest. He could hear the river growing closer, but with it came the worst scent he'd ever been unlucky enough to witness.

The black tom reached the bank of the river. His eyes widened at the thread of silver and brown and green streaks reflecting off of the water, a myriad of rainbows glittering in the sunlight. His paws scrabbled at the pebbles lining the edge and he turned to the side, eyes stinging. *This doesn't reach far, but it's enough...* Batchaser bit his lip in thought. *The river wasn't this bad where I jumped in the river with Rushingkit. It definitely seems to be spreading there, though*.

Despite wanting to throw up and get as far away from the river as possible, Batchaser decided it was best to see if he could find the source. He wondered if his senses were duller than your average cat, mostly just because he'd gotten out of StarClan — or, *purgatory*? He couldn't imagine having been a RiverClan cat living here. *No wonder they fled. I would have too.. can't say I blame Applestar.*

The river continued winding for what felt like ages, and the stench was honestly becoming hard for Batchaser to handle. But the end was coming near, he could tell because of how narrow the land had become, and the rush of the water was less prominent. And what he saw next was disturbing.

His jaw dropped wide in horror when he saw a metal Twoleg contraption toppled over on its side, black and gray liquid splitting out and trickling into the river. It covered every inch up here like night, and Batchaser couldn't even see the patches of moss under the surface. Bubbles popped every now and then and he jumped away before any of that black goo could stain him. He turned his head, trying not to throw up, and screwed his eyes shut. *Oh, StarClan.. this is.. not good..*

And the longer Batchaser looked at it, the more he realized this seemed to be a hopeless fix. *Looks like Applestar's going to be seeing me soon..*

A/N: Hey guys! Shorter-ish chapter, funny 'cuz I actually combined two to make this one lmao. I think I rewrote the second half like 2 or 3 times so I'm sorry if it didn't turn out great — I'm trying to push through my writer's block by writing, even if it isn't great. And I don't think this chapter is my greatest work, but I wanted to please you guys!

Anyway.... yep, an oil spill. Some serious stuff! How is Batty gonna fix it??? Any theories?? Suggestions? I'll try to reply to comments as much as possible! I really appreciate them.

Thanks for the neverending support you guys! Please vote and comment your thoughts, and may StarClan light your path 💕

Chapter 36 || Mission Impossible

"No."

"*What do you mean*, no?" Batchaser peeled his lips back, glaring at Applestar with a fiery look.

"There's nothing in the world that would convince me to leave my warriors to *you*," Applestar growled, squinting his green eyes. "It doesn't matter what you saw. In fact, I don't care. What have you done for RiverClan again?"

Batchaser's eyes widened, shock pulsing through his body. "Excuse me?" he snarled, face drawn into a scowl. "What have I done for your Clan? Oh, I don't know, maybe *watch over your medicine cat while he dies*?"

"I didn't forget what you said." The huge ginger tom shook his head. "Remember? Hm? RiverClan isn't your priority right now?"

StarClan... Batchaser wanted to scream at this ignorant tom that it didn't matter what he'd said before, but that the river was black with death and it would only spread from there. "Well, that's before I discovered what was causing the Blue Death!"

"You don't know it's causing the Blue Death!" Applestar leapt to his paws, bushy tail lashing. "Why would I lend valuable, *healthy* warriors to a cat who has never led in his life?"

Batchaser felt the fury rumbling in his chest, filling him full of a hot, lapping fire. "It must be," he said, teeth gritting. "You didn't see what I saw. You didn't— the river is right by the camp! If your cats drank from that water, then that's why they grew sick."

"You suddenly a medicine cat?" Applestar sneered.

"I've sure been acting like one." Batchaser was shocked. Why wasn't Applestar taking him seriously? He was a *StarClan* cat; wasn't that enough? "Why won't you just consider?"

"There's nothing *to* consider," the leader snapped back, but his voice fluttered in fear. "I've put my Clan in danger and was able to move us away from sickness. I'm not letting them return just because of your word."

"Then come see it with me!" Batchaser stood, paws anxiously leading his body back and forth across the cave floor. How did he convince Applestar to help him?

"I..." The ginger tom hesitated, biting his lip in thought. Batchaser paused, ears perking. Was Applestar amusing his idea? "I can't. I'm sorry. I..."

Disappointment writhed in Batchaser's belly. He truly felt like throwing up. *Coward!* he wanted to scream, but was smart enough to keep his mouth shut. "*Why*?" he decided to press, not intent on giving up this easily.

Applestar shook his head. "It doesn't matter."

"Of course it does!" Batchaser stared at the leader, brows furrowed. "What's going on here? Why won't you come with me?"

"I-" Applestar took a step back, curling his lip. "Why do you care? You'll be out of here as soon as Timberfall heals—"

"He may never heal! Not if we don't fix this!" Batchaser's voice gave out and he wondered what he was so upset about. Maybe the added days of stress had taken more of a toll on him than he'd originally thought. "Your duty as Clan leader is to protect your Clan. All it seems like you're doing now is protecting *yourself*."

"You don't know *anything*!" Applestar snarled, leaping forward. Batchaser quickly dodged out of the way, paws sliding on the stone. Applestar faced him, shaking like a leaf. "I was chosen to lead after Lionstar died, deputy-less. I was never equipped for this job, but I did the best I could. I brought my Clan to safety and I've been

protecting them ever since. Don't lecture me on leading — you've never even done it!"

That was true. Batchaser... he was no leader, but he knew the difference between right and wrong, only because of his past mistakes. "I may not be a leader, but through my time as a StarClan cat I've learned a lot of things. I've *changed*. You... you seem to just be stuck in the past."

Applestar's fur bristled, but he backed away from Batchaser, sitting down across from him. "My mate died because of this sickness," he finally whimpered, face drawn into sadness. "I— I'll never let go of the grief, never let go of Stormheart... Every time a Clanmate has died because of the Blue Death, I take the pain too because I *know* how it feels to lose someone you love. The guilt weighs down, and eventually..." He shook his head miserably. "I'm a terrible leader. I know. But I'm on my last life, and I need to stay strong for my Clan. I can't risk my life yet."

So that's why... Batchaser thought, tail twitching. *He's on his last life and thinks he could die if he explores with me*. Applestar was selfish, but he meant well. "You won't have to deal with this loss anymore if you just *help* me," Batchaser murmured. "Trust me. I came from *StarClan*. I'm not going to let you down."

Applestar sat in silence, thinking. He was muttering under his breath, which wasn't weird *at all*, but Batchaser had bigger fish to fry than the RiverClan leader's mental problems. The ginger tom finally lifted his head, and Batchaser felt his heart lift. He had to allow this. He *had* to— after that half-tailed speech he'd given, there was no way he'd decline!

"I'm sorry, but no."

That disappointment returned, weighing heavy in Batchaser's chest. He narrowed his eyes, voice growing cold. "Fine," he said. "If you want your cats to die like this, then suit yourself." The tom whipped around and stalked out of the den, leaping down from the rock to the mud-soaked ground, paws squelching in the water. He padded past Pearlsnap, who glanced at him curiously, and entered the medicine den with a puff of air.

Beetlepaw turned to Batchaser, brown eyes widening. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," he muttered, squeezing past the apprentice and eyeing the herbs stored in the crooks of the tan stone. He pushed his paw forward and gently plucked out an ivy leaf wrap, clawing chamomile out. The tom bent over and lapped up the white flowers, pushing the leaf away and standing fully.

Beetlepaw slid in front of him, black fur bushing. "Where are you going?"

Batchaser groaned. "*No where,*" he snapped. "Now leave me alone. You need to watch over Timberfall, anyway."

The apprentice shook his head. "He hasn't shown any symptoms all day. C'mon, what's going on?"

He hesitated, ears twitching. Batchaser didn't want to be disrespectful, considering this was Applestar's Clan and not his, but Beetlepaw was his friend—he deserved to know. "I found out what's causing the Blue Death and Applestar doesn't want to lend any warriors to help me. So, I'm going alone."

Beetlepaw's eyes widened. "You found the cause? What is it?"

"It doesn't matter. Applestar doesn't want anyone helping. Stay here." Batchaser tried to push past Beetlepaw but the smaller tom stopped him with a paw. "*What*?"

"I'm coming. If Applestar seriously won't help you, then I will."

"He *said* no *warriors*—"

"I'm not a warrior yet, am I?"

Batchaser's ears pricked in surprise. Beetlepaw had him there. The black tom smirked. "You're good. Maybe too good."

The apprentice smiled. "Either way, I'm coming. I want to help."

Batchaser nodded slowly. "Okay. You can help, then. I'll put a

warrior on Timberfall duty." The tom paused and turned, scraping more chamomile from the ivy leaf and pawing it over to Beetlepaw.

The apprentice raised his brows, obediently lapping up the traveling herb. "Are we going far?"

"I don't know yet." Batchaser sucked his teeth, plan rummaging through his head. He didn't actually know how far the Twolegplace was, and wasn't intent on taking any risks. They needed to keep their strength up, as much as possible.

Beetlepaw didn't question further and followed the warrior out of the medicine den. Batchaser spotted Makofoot and got her attention. "Watch Timberfall for me." The she-cat grunted in response and muttered something under her breath, but took her post by the mouth of the den and sat.

Before they could even make it out of camp, Pearlsnap slid in front of them with raised hackles. "Where do you think you're going?"

Oh, *great*. Batchaser peeled his lips back; he'd argued once today, and wasn't afraid to do it again. If it ensured the safety of RiverClan, then... "We're going to fix your stupid Blue Death."

Pearlsnap's eyes widened and her fur smoothed slightly, expression a mix between suspicion and shock. "What do you mean? If this is true, then you must tell Applestar!"

"What do you think I was doing earlier?" Batchaser shook his head, scowling. "He won't listen — he already said he's not sending any warriors to help. And, no offense, but I'm not letting *you* stop me either."

The she-cat hesitated, head twisting from the leader's den to the two cats. She eventually sighed. "Fine. You can go."

Batchaser breathed out a sigh of relief. "Thank StarClan. Beetlepaw, let's go."

Pearlsnap narrowed her eyes. "I'm coming with you."

The black tom was taken aback, but quickly regained his posture. "Good." *I'm impressed. She's not going to listen to Applestar? We'll see how this goes over later...*

"Hey! Where are you guys going?"

Batchaser cringed at the high-pitched voice and whipped around to see Rushingkit padding up after them. The ShadowClan tom shook his head. "It doesn't involve you. Go hang out with your sisters."

Rushingkit's ears flicked back. "They're sleeping..! I wanna go! Didn't.... didn't I prove myself in the Forgotten Eternity?"

Pearlsnap and Beetlepaw exchanged a glance, slightly confused. Batchaser only felt annoyance at the kit's pestering. "Yes, you did, but now you don't have to pretend. I won't let you be in danger anymore, not after I learned.." He trailed off, unsure if he should specify. They both knew, anyway. "Just stay here. We're dealing with it."

Batchaser turned, ignoring Rushingkit's hurt stare, and led the other two out of camp. He pulled himself over reeds and brambles, tail flicking behind him as their journey began. "This is the way to the Twolegplace, correct?"

Pearlsnap glanced at him. "Yes. Why are we going there?"

Batchaser blew out softly. "I have a plan. You may not like it, though."

She twitched her ears. "Try me."

Before Batchaser could explain his idea, the old camp came into view. Pearlsnap and Beetlepaw faltered slightly. "We could get sick if we go in there," the apprentice muttered.

"That's why we're going around." Batchaser beckoned the two to follow him around the edge of the camp, fallen leaves breaking beneath their paws. Shafts of light broke through the storm, sun spilling over the ground and dappling their pelts in golden splotches. Batchaser squinted through the light as the trees thinned

out into rolling slopes, blades of grass swaying below their bellies. The Horseplace was a small dot in the distance, a few Twoleg houses scattered to the side. *There it is...*

"You never explained the plan," Pearlsnap went on, catching up with Batchaser in a few strides. Beetlepaw struggled to keep up, small legs working quickly against the ground.

"Well." Batchaser flicked his tail, musing. "You didn't see the river, not like I did. It's... it's black, *completely* black, like you're looking up at the night sky and there's no stars. I followed the water and found a Twoleg contraption tipped over, spilling that black substance into the water."

Pearlsnap raised her brows. "And...? Your plan?"

"This is going to sound stupid, so don't laugh." Batchaser wondered how much StarClan and the Forgotten Eternity had changed him. Clearly a lot. "We're going to lead a Twoleg to the contraption."

Beetlepaw burst out laughing from behind them. Batchaser rolled his eyes and continued on, ignoring Pearlsnap's amused whisker twitch. "I'm sorry, *what*?" the apprentice wheezed. "We're.... we're working with *Twolegs*?"

"Yep." Batchaser popped the 'p' and smacked Beetlepaw in the face with his tail. "Don't make fun of me. This is the only way to stop the disease from spreading even further."

"Batchaser, this..." Pearlsnap shook her head. "This is dangerous. There must be another way!"

"There *isn't*," the ShadowClanner stressed. "I'm sorry, but this is our best shot."

Silence followed the group as they continued making their way toward the Twolegplaces. Pearlsnap eventually sighed. "I'd do anything for my Clan. I'd *die* for them. So if this is something I have to risk, then... so be it."

Beetlepaw purred. "Me, too. Even if I think this plan is *insane*, I

trust you, Batchaser. I just hope Timberfall is okay while we're gone.."

Pearlsnap's ears flicked up. "You're worried about him, huh?"

The apprentice sighed wistfully. "Yeah. Pollenstrike hates when I'm in the medicine den, though. It sucks. I really... I really feel like I belong in there!"

The deputy tilted her head in thought. "Perhaps I could discuss with Applestar and Timberfall—when he gets better—about making you a medicine cat apprentice."

Beetlepaw stopped, head swiveling. "Wait. You— you really mean that?"

"Of course. You've shown yourself to be equipped and hard-working with medicine, and you're spectacular when taking care of other cats. It's perfect."

Batchaser groaned. "Look, I love this little heart-felt chat happening behind me, but we're nearly to the Twolegplace. Can we just focus now? Medicine cat discussion later."

Pearlsnap grunted but quieted down as they rounded the Horseplace fences, eyes widening at the horses grazing on the fields. Batchaser narrowed his eyes, leading the group toward the barns. *We're close... I just have to hope to StarClan—even if they can't hear me right now—that this works. This is RiverClan's last hope.*

The sound of heavy footsteps stopped Batchaser in his steps. Without a second thought, he dove into the nearby bushes, Pearlsnap and Beetlepaw swiftly following. The black tom crept close to the fence, poking his head around the side of the barn. His eyes widened when he spotted an adolescent Twoleg trying to pry open something on the barn. *Oh, please, please, please.. follow us!*

"So what's the plan?" Beetlepaw whispered, voice small and hushed.

"I already *told* you—"

"No, I mean now! Like... do we scratch the Twoleg? How do we get it to follow us?"

Batchaser sighed. "I don't know. Just let me deal with that."

Pearlsnap rolled her gray eyes. "You're a zombie cat and you want to... y'know, risk your life? For *RiverClan*?"

"Zombie cat? Seriously?"

"Yeah, I mean, you *were* brought back to life or whatever, at least that's what Applestar told you, so technically—"

"Guys! Shut up!" Beetlepaw hushed them quickly and pointed to the Twoleg, who was now staring at the bushes. It narrowed its eyes and stuck its fingers in its mouth, whistling. The cats exchanged glances and Pearlsnap's fur spiked, claws unsheathing. Suddenly, a white ball of fur raced around the corner, beady black eyes gleaming in the sunlight. Spit dripped from the small dog's mouth as it sprinted toward the group, paws propelling it forward.

Batchaser was about to turn tail and run—Pearlsnap and Beetlepaw prepared to do the exact opposite—before a silver cat dove above their heads, landing on the ground in front of them.

"Rushingkit!" Batchaser yowled, muscles tensing. "What are you doing here?!"

The kit scrabbled away from the dog, making his way toward the Twoleg. It glanced down at Rushingkit and hesitated, hand hovering in the air. The dog tried to make a run for the silver tom but the Twoleg called it off with a yell. *The bushes must be masking our scent, but... Cypressfall will kill me if anything happens to him!*

Rushingkit pushed himself against the Twoleg's ankle, purring loudly, wrapping his tail around its leg. The Twoleg bent down to pet him but Rushingkit whipped around and began to sprint, ducking under the fence and glancing at the group. "Come on!" he whispered.

The Twoleg stilled before following, throwing itself over the fence and running through the undergrowth. Batchaser led the way

to the river, Rushingkit keeping close behind, flicking his body through tangled branches and thick roots. The Twoleg continued to follow, pushing the brush away with his hands. Batchaser heard the dull roar of the river before they made it to the bank, sand slipping under their paws. The black tom instinctively grabbed Rushingkit's scruff and pulled him into the foliage, pressing close to the earth. Pearlsnap and Beetlepaw scrambled next to them and did the same, the rapids blocking out any clear thoughts or words to share.

After a moment, the Twoleg appeared and stumbled into the clearing, bending over and breathing heavily. It lifted its head and suddenly groaned, shoving its hand over its mouth and staring at the silver contraption spilling inky blackness into the water. It flanked the shore and touched the river, flicking the black from its hands. After a few more moments of exploring, it seemed to lose interest in Rushingkit and sprinted back toward the barn, sand kicking up behind its feet.

The cats exchanged glances. "Um," Rushingkit mused, "should we... wait?"

Batchaser wanted to be angry at the kit for risking his life and possibly *their* lives by confronting the Twoleg, but simply couldn't. Affection pooled into his heart and he smiled at Rushingkit, nodding. *He's growing up so fast.*.

And so they waited. And waited. And waited.... Pearlsnap almost gave up and led the group back to camp, but a rustling nearby alerted the cats. The adolescent Twoleg appeared, but behind him were at least four other older Twolegs.

Excitement. It tingled in Batchaser's paws and caused a small laugh to leave his jaws. He never genuinely laughed, but this... this was surreal. A Twoleg had listened to them. To *cats*. It was a miracle.

"Well..." Beetlepaw looked between the three others, whiskers twitching in amusement, "I guess that worked out well."

A/N: Okay, okay, I *know* , it's been too long and it's totally like me blah blah blah. But there's been so much goin' on in my life

right now and I simply didn't have the time or motivation to write. I actually finished this chapter at the river, where there's absolutely no WiFi, so I basically had nothing else to do besides, well, *write* . Thank the Devil's River for this chapter.

I'd been having a hard time getting past this chapter, but I'm hoping that now, things will flow a lot more smoothly. At least, for now. We still have a *lot* more chapters, so don't you worry about the story ending any time soon. At this rate, I won't be finished for another 5 years! And to think I started Bound to Stars in October of 2016...

Anyway, what did you guys think of the chapter? The group was able to pull through and found a solution to RiverClan's problem! Now, Batchaser can finally focus his efforts on fixing the false prophecy and helping another Clan... speaking of, what Clan do you think he'll visit nest?

Feel free to leave your thoughts, comments, ideas, and theories below! Thank you for reading, and may StarClan light your path!

Chapter 37 || Out With The New

The week had been rocky, but nonetheless held high hopes and excitement for RiverClan. Since the group had led the Twoleg to the black part of the water, patrols had been sent to scout that area where the Twoleg contraption lay. Amazingly, the Twolegs were *fixing* it.

Not only that, but Timberfall had made a full recovery in seven days—history for the Clan—and managed to share enthusiasm about returning to their home. Under Pearlsnap and Applestar's agreement, Beetlepaw had been changed from a warrior to a medicine cat apprentice. Timberfall had been surprised and ecstatic about the whole ordeal.

And as for Batchaser... well, he'd been trying to get along with everyone. The mask had fallen and he was actually managing to fit in with RiverClan—now wasn't that something? Rushingkit had been on Batchaser's hip the past week as well, and Pearlsnap was trying to gather as much information from the ShadowClan tom as she could—mostly to do with StarClan. He'd given in and admitted to the weak link between their ancestors and the Clans because of the war, of course, *only* to Pearlsnap, Applestar, and Timberfall, and they'd vowed to keep out of any battles and remain neutral on all sides.

Batchaser had been happy to hear that, and interested when Applestar has shared their history in the war as well. After ThunderClan had been blamed and driven out of their territory, Applestar had realized their mistake and tried to make amends. After speaking out at a gathering between only RiverClan, ShadowClan, and WindClan, ShadowClan had declared war on RiverClan for believing in traitors, and WindClan had sided with ShadowClan.

With Clans attacking from both sides, RiverClan had no chance.

When the Blue Death hit, things became even worse and they were forced to surrender. ShadowClan wasn't happy with that answer, however, and continued to attack RiverClan. Finally, when things got bad enough, Applestar decided to leave their camp and retreat farther back into the territory. No other Clans had attacked or come looking for them—thank StarClan, of course—and thus, they were here. After moons of silence on the war, ThunderClan had come back from their hiding place and attacked in full-force. With a new, strong leader and fearsome warriors, they now had the upper paw in the war.

Luckily, Batchaser was still with RiverClan. For now, at least. Speaking of...

"We need to move your Clan back to the original camp," Batchaser hummed, wrapping his tail around his paws.

Applestar narrowed his eyes, grunting. "The last time we were in our *old* camp, we had two Clans attacking us from both sides. What would stop them now?"

"You're stronger," Batchaser responded, "and I'm here. As a StarClan cat, they'll have to listen to me."

"They don't *have* to," Timberfall countered, ear twitching. "In fact, it's more likely they won't believe you're from StarClan. War doesn't change minds easily. You were lucky—we aren't *in* the war anymore. And Applestar supposedly remembers you." The medicine cat shrugged. "ThunderClan will be hardest to conform, and I'm assuming ShadowClan won't back down any time soon, either. However..."

Batchaser glanced at the chestnut tom. "Hm?"

"They have a new leader," Pearlsnap cut in, scowling. "Fallenstar's daughter, Spiderstar."

Spiderstar... The name sounded vaguely familiar—there was a memory there, but Batchaser couldn't put his paw on it. He shrugged to himself, then paused. "Fallenstar made his daughter his deputy? That's unusual."

Applestar shook his head. "No. Fallenstar... he made his Clan a *monarchy*, for some reason. Spiderstar has no kits to follow her, so ShadowClan has been left deputy-less for moons, since after the last gathering."

A *monarchy*? Now *that* was new. "Interesting... I wonder why he chose to change the rank. Of course, by doing that, Fallenstar broke the warrior code—I can't imagine his Clanmates were happy with that."

Timberfall shook his head. "From what I heard in my last medicine cat meeting, half of the warriors left ShadowClan to become rogues and kittypets."

Batchaser's eyebrows raised. "Oh. How many moons ago did that happen?"

The medicine cat shrugged. "Dunno. Fourteen, maybe. ShadowClan stopped showing up at the meetings, and so did ThunderClan. WindClan was the last to go, and then... well, there's no reason to meet by myself. StarClan stopped communicating, anyway. We never dreamed."

"You let Timberfall meet with other medicine cats during a war?" the black tom asked, surprised. He turned his blue gaze to Applestar.

The leader sighed softly. "Yes. My faith in StarClan is still strong, and I didn't want to anger my ancestors by preventing Timberfall from meeting the other medicine cats. However... it seems the other leaders didn't quite agree."

Batchaser snorted. "Well, trust me, RiverClan is the least problematic on StarClan's list."

Pearlsnap puffed out a breath of air. "Well, *that's* a relief. Let me guess, ThunderClan is the top priority?"

"Yep." The black tom swished his tail. "Our... group leader, of sorts, was an old leader of ThunderClan. She's very invested in their new way of life and behavior."

"An old leader of ThunderClan?" Timberfall piped up. "Who?"

Batchaser hesitated, ears flicking back. Jackalstar wouldn't want him to say. "It doesn't matter who. All that matters is that we're going to save the Clans, at least, as quickly and efficiently as we can."

"How many are in your group?" Pearlsnap asked.

The black tom hummed in thought. *We have me, Jackalstar, Shellstar, Galewhisker, Cypressfall, and Rushingkit...* "Six."

Applestar's eyes widened. "*Six*?"

"Yeah. All from different Clans, too... Three from ThunderClan, I'm from ShadowClan, another leader from WindClan, Rushingkit.." He shrugged. "We didn't choose for this to happen, but it did. At least, *I* didn't choose for it to." He realized he was blabbering about his StarClan life, but it was exciting to talk about it to living cats—they ate up all of the information they could, and Batchaser relished that attention.

"That's... a lot of cats saving the Clans. I forgot about Rushingkit traveling with you.." Applestar frowned. "He died so young. But now that he's back, living and breathing, perhaps he can be a part of RiverClan again."

"Definitely. You need to keep him out of harm's way." Batchaser scratched his ear with his back paw, groaning. "But seriously, enough talk. Let's move this Clan back home."

The others nodded and lead Batchaser out of the den. Without the storm, the sky was painted blue and white, soft clouds glittering over the trees. The sun hid behind a few clouds and darkened the camp slightly, shadows creeping over the earth and stretching long black fingers toward the river. *I know this isn't a sign from StarClan, but it sure looks like one.*

"What makes you suddenly so *important*?" A sharp hiss next to Batchaser froze him in place. He narrowed his eyes and glanced over at Beavertooth, who was scowling at him by the fresh-kill-pile.

He shrugged, nonchalant. "I don't know. Clearly I'm more important than you are,
though; and I've only been here a half moon!" Batchaser smirked at Beavertooth's crooked snarl. He still disliked the tom, despite him saving Batchaser from the river.

Beavertooth leapt to his paws and stalked over to the black tom, fur bristling along his back. He squared his shoulders and craned his muzzle over Batchaser's head. The black tom looked up at Beavertooth, unimpressed. "Watch your back, ShadowClanner," he snarled. "Unlike Applestar, I'm not soft. I don't double-deal with *traitors*."

"Wow. You're very scary, aren't you?" Batchaser twitched his whiskers. A call from the middle of camp pulled the toms out of their bickering. "Whoops. Looks like we're going back to the new camp, which *I* helped save by the way... guess I'll see you there."

Beavertooth was about to snap back with something, but Batchaser had already walked away and Applestar's voice pressed over his. "It's time to move to our former camp, RiverClan," the leader stated diplomatically, chest puffing. "Take anything you might need with you. Please help Timberfall and Beetlepaw carry the herbs back to the old camp."

Several warriors exchanged excited glances and flocked to either take their nests or carry herbs. By the time Batchaser realized what was going on, all jobs were full. He grunted and padded next to Applestar out of the mouth of camp, ignoring Beavertooth's harsh glare.

"So," the black tom mused. "This is happening."

Applestar hummed. "Yes... it is." He glanced at Batchaser, a look of confusion on his face. "I never really thanked you for everything you've done for my Clan. I.. doubted you, at first, but now I know I was wrong to do so. And for that I am sorry."

Batchaser could hardly contain his laughter. The ginger leader eyed him suspiciously until he spoke. "Don't be sorry, big guy," the ShadowClanner giggled, tail flicking Applestar's flank. "I'm a

StarClan cat. That's kind of my job here, right?"

"Hmm... yes, I suppose." A genuine smile raised Applestar's lips. "What are you going to do next? I can't imagine you'll be staying in RiverClan for much longer, since we aren't the most problematic of your little list."

The trees swayed overhead as a soft breeze brushed through the territory, ruffling their pelts. "I'm not sure," Batchaser admitted. "I'm assuming ShadowClan, unless J— unless my *friends* want me to meet them back in WindClan." Applestar twitched his whiskers, picking up on the hint of a name, but didn't comment on it. "Then again, I can go wherever I want!"

Pearlsnap eventually caught up to the two and conversed with Applestar about the warriors and how much they'd helped with the medicine den. Batchaser noticed the shift in mood when the old— or, well, *original*— territory was crossed into. The enthusiasm grew, as did the buzz of chatter behind them. When the three led the Clan into camp, everything flowed smoothly from there.

Cats practically *ran* to their nests, setting their bedding down with smiling faces and bright eyes. Timberfall and Beetlepaw set up in the medicine den, storing rotten herbs in the corner to dispose of later. Applestar leapt up into his den, fur smoothing at the familiar scent and lulling hum of the river nearby. Batchaser sat in the center of camp, tail wrapping around his paws. He was happy for RiverClan—he really was. *They're finally back home because of me. I did that. I.. I fixed what I ruined!*

The black tom watched as Applestar waited a few moments before leaping upon a willow tree stump next to his den, rising to his full height. "Let all cats old enough to swim gather to hear my words!"

The Clan swarmed in the center of camp, a hushed silence falling upon the group. Content with the quiet, Applestar cleared his throat. "First and foremost, I dedicate this meeting to Batchaser, Pearlsnap, Beetlepaw, and Rushingkit." Said cats perked up slightly. "Without them, the Blue Death would've spread and we wouldn't have been safe in the territories any longer. However, with their

help, *especially* Batchaser's, we've been able to return to our true home and make ourselves RiverClan again."

Cats cheered, yowls echoing through the hanging branches and spreading over the meadows. Batchaser blinked and nodded, slightly self-conscious. He wasn't accustomed to so much praise. "Now that we're in our old home,"
Applestar continued, "there are a few ceremonies that must take place. Bushpaw, Whisperpaw, step up."

Rushingkit's sisters exchanged eager glances and scrabbled into the middle of camp, smiling at their brother's pride. "I, Applestar, leader of RiverClan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on these apprentices. They have trained hard to understand the ways of your noble code, and I commend them to you as a warrior in their turn. Bushpaw, Whisperpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend your Clan, even at the cost of your life?"

"I do," the sisters said in unison.

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior name. Bushpaw, from this moment on you will be known as Bushtail. StarClan honors your wisdom and kindness, and we welcome you as a full warrior of RiverClan. Whisperpaw, from this moment on, you will be known as Whisperflight. StarClan honors your tenacity and loyalty, and we welcome you as a full warrior of RiverClan."

Screeches of delight filled the clearing, every single cat standing and cheering the new warriors on. After the sisters flanked the side of the camp, Applestar twitched his tail for silence. The Clan hushed. "This next ceremony is something new in the history of the Clans, and I hope everyone will respect and agree to my decision. Rushingkit, step up."

Everyone froze for a moment, Rushingkit most of all. His soft blue eyes widened in shock and he swiveled his head toward Batchaser, beginning to tremble. An awkward silence filled the gap until Batchaser stood, smiling. "Go on," he told the kit. The rest of the Clan began to cheer when Rushingkit stepped forward, tilting his head up to meet Applestar's gaze.

"Rushingkit, you have long passed the age of six moons, so it is time for you to be apprenticed. From this day on, until you receive your warrior name, you will be known as Rushingpaw. Your mentor will be Watercall. I hope she will pass down all she knows to you." When mentor and apprentice touched noses, the Clan erupted in yowls. Bushtail and Whisperflight cheered loudest, of course.

Rushingpaw smiled and backed into the group of gathered cats, beaming. Batchaser smiled and hardly heard Applestar call off the meeting over the beating of his heart thrumming in his ears. The black tom padded forward and crouched down next to Rushingpaw, smirking. "So. You're *actually* an apprentice now."

The silver apprentice giggled, bopping Batchaser's nose with his tail. "Yep, I finally am! Isn't that amazing? One day, I'll be just like you!"

Oh, trust me, you don't want that... Batchaser's smile dropped into a soft frown. He sighed wistfully and wrapped his tail around Rushingpaw's body, pressing him close. "I hope you understand that with RiverClan in their original home, my job here is done... I gotta move on to my next mission down here."

Rushingpaw's eyes widened. "Wait, you're leaving?"

Batchaser's heart hurt. "Yes, I'm afraid. Jackalstar will need me for something new soon, so you won't be seeing me for a while. Okay?"

The apprentice pushed his muzzle into Batchaser's chest and cried out. "Okay," he whispered brokenly. "I get it. That's okay. Do what you have to do."

"What's going on?" Pearlsnap strode over to the two, concern clear in her posture. "What happened?"

"Nothing," Rushingpaw mumbled, pulling away from Batchaser. "Batty's leaving."

Beavertooth glanced over.

"*Leaving*?" Pearlsnap echoed, clearly surprised. Applestar leapt

down from the tree stump, a cloud of dust filling the air behind him. He sat down by his deputy, tilting his head. Timberfall and Beetlepaw neared them as well. "Where?"

Batchaser shrugged and slowly stood, grunting when his muscles popped. "Dunno. I'll have to see, but most likely ShadowClan."

"It was great having you, Batchaser. I understand that you're needed elsewhere." Applestar dipped his head and smiled.

"Yes, me too," Pearlsnap said, ears flicking back in embarrassment. "Thanks for, uh, saving us with the whole *river* thing."

"No problem," he snorted.

Timberfall also dipped his head. "Thank you for healing me, Batchaser. I owe you my life."

"Pft, no-"

"See ya, Batchaser!" Beetlepaw leapt to his paws and purred, blinking up at the warrior. He hasn't even realized he'd cut the ShadowClanner off. "Will you come back?"

"Probably," Batchaser laughed. "Just yell if you need me!" The black tom paused and glanced at the four cats gathered around him. "Thanks for not kicking me out. But now... it's time for me to go."

A few more words were said before Batchaser turned and padded from the camp, heart weighing lighter in his chest. He smiled and hopped from the river's shore to the stones inside, water trickling over his black paws. Batchaser scrabbled to the other side and twisted his head, longingly staring at RiverClan territory. *I'm gonna miss them...* As the sun began to set, orange and pink ripples spread across the darkening blue sky. *But now I'm being called elsewhere.*

Batchaser whirled back to the dark, looming pine forest ahead of him. ShadowClan didn't seem any friendlier than before, and he supposed it would stay that way. *Oh, dear StarClan, just let them listen to me...*

As Batchaser took his first steps back to his old home, he pushed away the deep pit in his stomach that screamed at him to turn tail and run.

A/N: Wow, two updates in one day? A very rare Paint sighting indeed! Nonetheless, this chapter was a little shorter, but still fun to write! I loved exploring RiverClan, but now we're on to the big boys...and their problems don't lie in diseases.

Hope you enjoyed! Please comment your thoughts, and may StarClan light your path!

Chapter 38 || Shadows

The taste of sap hung thickly in the air, flooding Batchaser's senses. His blue eyes scanned the forest, paws crunching on pine needles and tail waving through the foliage.

ShadowClan hadn't changed. The pines towering above his head blocked out the sun, and the branches strewn along the tree tops gave almost a cold chill to the area. The needles under his paws were sticky and pointy, clinging to his pads like mud. He flicked them off with a paw and grunted, ears twitching. *It's been so long...* Batchaser thought with a frown. *It's been ages since I was here. And nothing has changed...* Well.

Only the lack of cats was different. ShadowClan had been very aggressive and territorial during Fallenstar's reign, and now it seemed like there weren't even patrols. Much like RiverClan, the borders were stale, but not non-existent. That had to be a sign, right? *I wonder if they'll remember me.* He huffed. *Time seems to pass differently in StarClan and the Forgotten Eternity... it was only a few moons there. It's been at least fifteen down here. Maybe more..!* He shook his head and continued walking. If ShadowClan did remember him, then Batchaser's life was going to be a lot easier.

"Come on. You can't be serious."

The voice caught Batchaser off guard. His eyes widened slightly and he dropped low to the ground, slinking into the blankets of undergrowth to shield his body. He crept forward slowly, peering through the bushes. He saw a huge, long-furred black she-cat pacing aggressively. "Why do you say that?" she snapped in return to the previous voice.

Batchaser's heart thundered when he saw the white she-cat standing to the side, the scent of herbs clinging to her pelt. *Cloudflame!* He screwed his eyes shut and remembered the last thing he'd ever seen as a living cat. Cloudflame had stood over him, trying desperately to help, but... to no avail. *That's one cat that'll*

remember me. I wonder what they're arguing about, though?

Cloudflame narrowed sharp yellow eyes at the unknown black she-cat. "Because you don't want to do anything to protect your Clan."

"I *can't* do anything." The black she-cat shook her head and rose to her paws, standing at least two heads over Cloudflame. Her muscles rippled under her fur and she showed her teeth. "I would appreciate it if you did your job and *healed*, Cloudflame. I don't need your advice."

"My job may be in medicine, but I'm also meant to guide you when needed." The black she-cat whirled around to storm off, but Cloudflame skidded to a halt in front of her. "Listen to me!"

"Or what?" Cloudflame was quiet. The black she-cat grunted and shouldered her way past the medicine cat. "That's what I thought."

Yeesh. Batchaser shook his head and waited for them both to leave. *I could talk to her, I guess, but... I'd rather make a surprise entrance*.

Before Cloudflame turned to walk away, she froze in place, tail-tip twitching. She whirled around, claws unsheathing, and suddenly dove into the foliage where Batchaser was hiding. He yelped in surprise and felt her paws sink into his shoulders, weight spinning on top of him. He rolled out from the bushes and grunted when his back was slammed into the ground, Cloudflame growling as she glared down at him. Her expression morphed into one of disbelief and shock, and she leapt off of him, shaking like a leaf. "B-Batchaser?"

"Yes," he mumbled, staggering to his feet and swaying slightly. He shook the clinging pine needles from his black pelt and glanced up at Cloudflame. "Nice to see you, too."

"Oh..." She raised her gaze and examined her surroundings. "I didn't know I was in StarClan.. this whole day has been... fake?"

Batchaser sighed heavily, drawing her attention. "No," he said,

"I'm... I'm not here to talk to you from StarClan. We aren't even *in* StarClan."

Cloudflame narrowed her eyes. "You're pulling my tail."

"I'm *not*," he defended, brows narrowing. "I'm here. I'm- alive, or whatever. Dead-alive. Alive-dead. You get it."

"*Batchaser*." She stomped forward and smacked him in the muzzle.

"*Ow*!"

"I'm not here to play games! Is it a prophecy? Is something happening? I need to know, you- oh my StarClan, are you *bleeding*?"

"No, *really*?" he snapped, wiping the beads of blood off of his face. Ugh! Living cats were so annoying!

"Oh, *no*." She shook her head and dropped to the ground. "You're actually here. You're- how are you alive? I thought you died! Everyone did! We... we *buried* you..."

Batchaser rolled his eyes. "Get up, Cloudflame. I did die, but I came back-" He shook his head at her confused expression. "Look, it's too much to explain. Right now-"

"You smell like RiverClan." She scrunched her nose.

"Because I just *came* from there." He bit back for a moment, hesitating. Could he tell her that RiverClan was back in the territories, ready to join the other Clans again? *She's a medicine cat, and it's her duty... I can trust her*. "I helped them. RiverClan is back in their home. ShadowClan is the second biggest annoyance, so here I am."

Her eyes widened. "RiverClan is back? In their territory? They've been missing for so long- we figured they had left-"

"Well, they're here," he cut in, voice breaking from stress. "Look, seriously, I'll have to explain this later. Can you take me to Spiderstar?"

"Well, you just missed her." The she-cat's tail-tip twitched in agitation and she sunk her claws into the ground.

"Oh." Batchaser's voice fell flat and he squinted, thinking of the huge black she-cat. *That was Spiderstar? Why does her name seem so familiar..? Oh well*, it didn't matter. Not right now, at least. "Will she care if I come to camp?"

Cloudflame shrugged, turning on her heels. "Probably not," she said, grunting, padding forward without another word. Batchaser hesitated but eventually followed, jogging to catch up to her side. He matched the medicine cat's strides, frowning. She sighed. "What's wrong with your face?"

"What?" he asked, looking at her, slightly offended. "My face is fine!"

"Well, you're scowling, so no." She hooked her claws into the soft grass underpaw. "Come on, spit it out."

"See- *that*." He felt slightly out of place, like the world had been tipped on its head. Cloudflame was once sweet, kind, and hardly argumentative. Now... "You've changed."

"Of course I've changed." She cast a glance at him. "I don't know how you came back, but other cats don't get that chance. I only have one life, and I have to do my best with it. I-" Cloudflame growled as she walked. "I'm the one that takes care of this Clan. Spiderstar and I... we don't get along. And if I have to be rude and obnoxious to get things done, then so be it."

I guess I understand that. I've changed myself. He let the silence thread between them, but it wasn't awkward or tense. *It was... it was nice.*

"Batchaser?"

He flicked his head toward Cloudflame's soft, rough voice. "Yes?"

She stopped and fully turned to him. "Is- is Lynxbite- have you seen her?"

Pain. It gripped his heart in pointed claws and sunk sharp fangs through his mind. The memories of his former mate were still raw with emotion, but he could also remember the poison in their relationship. Cloudflame noticed his grief and set her tail on his back, smoothing his black fur down. "I-" Batchaser sucked in a deep breath. "No. I haven't."

He could see the heartbreak in Cloudflame's eyes, but it was instantly masked. "Well," she said slowly. "Perhaps she didn't want to see you."

Batchaser laughed bitterly and continued to walk, feeling the anger lap in his chest. "Oh, thanks," he said sarcastically. "That makes me feel so much better."

"Batch- Batchaser!" She sighed and caught up with him in a few quick strides, closing the gap between them. "Hey. Look, I'm sorry. I just- she's my sister, you know? I want make sure that she's okay."

"She's dead, Cloudflame," he said, voice rough with exhaustion from the topic. She flinched. "I don't know where she is. I don't know where my kits are. I wish I did, but I can't help you. I'm sorry."

Her eyes widened slightly. "Wait, hold on- was that- was that a *sorry* I heard? *Batchaser apologized*? Oh, StarClan! It's a miracle!"

Batchaser was thankful for the subject change and rolled his blue eyes. "Okay, okay, let's not go yell to the world about it."

"I'm just surprised," she said. "I don't ever remember you apologizing to anyone." She smirked and tilted her chin upward. "You've changed, too, Batchaser."

Have I, really? He wasn't entirely sure, but hoped that he was doing a little better than before. He was trying not to be as rude and snappy, but sometimes it was impossible to deal with these cats. *Still. I've made friendships I never would've made before, when I was truly alive*. He almost smiled at that. He was thankful for Pearlsnap, Applestar, and Beetlepaw. They were good cats.

They continued to walk and the silence deafened the forest, engulfing the front of camp in looming darkness. Batchaser relaxed at the sight of the entrance, face falling from cautious to happy. *I haven't been here in so long...* He exchanged a glance with Cloudflame, turned away, and padded into camp.

Not much was different. The leader's den had been patched up with brambles and vines, Batchaser noticed, but there was nothing else that stood out much. *This is a sight for sore eyes...* He rolled his shoulders forward and twitched his tail, glancing around camp. He noticed a few cats sitting near the fresh-kill-pile, but they didn't even bother to turn and look. Batchaser frowned. *This is weird.*

"Foxshade," Cloudflame called to a russet-furred warrior eating a finch. He turned to her and rolled his eyes. "Where's Spiderstar?"

"Why would I know?" he snapped, fur bushing. Foxshade tilted his head and returned to his conversation with another ginger cat. Cloudflame weighted her paws, frowning at the lack of a clear answer. *No wonder she's stressed! Maybe I should say something...?*

"Hey." Batchaser walked past Cloudflame and glared down at the warrior.

Foxshade paused mid-sentence and groaned, looking toward him. "*What*?" He squinted. "Who are you?"

"I'm the cat that's about to make your life miserable if you don't tell me where Spiderstar is," Batchaser growled.

"She left a while ago," the ginger she-cat said, smiling softly. That was slightly more helpful. "I'm sorry, who... are you?"

"*Cloudflame*." Foxshade stumbled to his paws and whirled on the medicine cat, fangs baring. "Who is this? Your secret lover? He smells like fish!"

"Why in StarClan's name- no!" she snarled back, claws unsheathing. "Are you stupid? My loyalty is to my Clan and the warrior code!"

"When did that ever stop anyone?" the ginger she-cat muttered.

Batchaser sighed and stood back as Cloudflame and Foxshade squabbled. *Well, ShadowClan sure is trusting of each other...* He frowned when Foxshade's claws slid out and pierced the ground underpaw, slick fur beginning to bush. "Stop lying, Cloudflame!"

"I'm not *lying*!" she snapped, waving her tail to the black tom. "He's a friend! An old one! He..." She frowned and swiped her head over her shoulder to look at him. "Batchaser, tell them."

"Uh." Batchaser shrugged and raised a paw, waving. "Hi? I came back from the dead and I'm here to help."

The ginger she-cat raised her brows and fumbled to her paws. "Hng," she said as her muscles popped. "Sorry, what? You're dead?"

"Fireshine," Foxshade grunted. "You can't be serious. You believe him? You believe Cloudflame?"

"I saw your mother give birth to you," the white-furred medicine cat hissed. "I've healed you more times than either of us can count. You should be thanking me, but instead all you do is question me! Why wouldn't you believe it? He was a ShadowClan warrior! He died in a battle!"

Foxshade sneered. "Really? You're from StarClan? Prove it!"

How in StarClan's name am I meant to prove that? Batchaser thought back to his encounter with Sunpaw and wondered if he could somehow recreate what happened. *Probably not. I don't even know what I did the first time*. "Look," he started, "I—"

"Shut up!" another cat snapped from the side. "We'll let Spiderstar deal with you! For now, you're our prisoner." He stepped up and sniffed Batchaser. "Eugh. RiverClan!"

"Don't tell *me* to shut up," Batchaser hissed back, unable to control his anger. "I'm not a prisoner. I was a former ShadowClan cat! I died, then died again, then woke up- look, it's confusing, but I just helped RiverClan and now I'm here!"

"Fish-eater!" some random cat taunted from the back of the gathering crowd.

"Traitor!"

"Coward!"

"Kill him!"

"Let's run him off the territory!"

Batchaser cringed and flicked his ears back. *Dear StarClan....what has ShadowClan become?* He couldn't imagine something like this ever happening back in his day. Even worse, warriors were beginning to turn on each other, and he could see the hint of a fight between two toms.

"*Enough*."

The camp fell silent at the rough, deep words. Batchaser tilted his head up and narrowed his eyes through the darkness. He suddenly froze, sinking his claws into the ground to steady himself. A huge gray tabby tom moved through the masses of bodies, fur ragged and green eye sharp. His muzzle was gray with age, and one of his eyes was completely ripped from the socket. Only a deep, jagged scar was left behind.

"Gorsebrush," Foxshade muttered, dipping his head and scrambling out of the way.

The old tom flicked his ear in acknowledgment and glanced down at Batchaser. He wasn't sure if Gorsebrush remembered him, but Batchaser certainly remembered Gorsebrush. *He was a senior warrior by the time I received my warrior name...*

"So..." Fireshine looked between the two toms. "Are we gonna chase him out, or..?"

Gorsebrush's whiskers twitched in amusement, and a small smile made its way on his jaws. "No," he said. "Batchaser. I remember you."

The other warriors gathered around exchanged surprised glances, eyes widening. Batchaser was surprised, but instantly relieved to hear those words. He really didn't want to be run out of

a Clan right now, especially his old home. *And I need to fix this place*.... That could come later, though. "That's good to hear," Batchaser replied, and grinned when Gorsebrush's smile widened.

"I don't remember seeing you happy," the elder said, sweeping his tail to keep the other cats behind him back. "I can't believe it's you. How are you here?"

"Oh, a little purgatory and some zombification," he shrugged. Batchaser was pretty sure that wasn't a word, but. Oh well. "I was, uh, kinda sent by StarClan to help the Clans..?" He wasn't exactly sure how to word it, because Batchaser was the last cat his ancestors would pick. Still, he was *here*. That had to mean something. "RiverClan was first, and now I'm here. I'd really rather not get attacked today, though."

"Yes," Cloudflame sighed, exhausted as she padded up to the two, turning back to the rest of the Clan. "Batchaser is only here to help. StarClan sent him, and both Gorsebrush and I remember him. Please. We must let him save ShadowClan."

There was a long thread of silence before Fireshine dipped her head. "Of course," she said, "any warrior of ShadowClan is a friend of mine, dead or not." Before he knew it, the entirety of the Clan was bowing, like he was some kind of king.

Seriously? This is pathetic. Batchaser had to keep himself from rolling his eyes, and instead nodded in return to the cats. "Thank you," he said in his most I-am-really-thankful-you-all-didn't-murder-me voice, "I'll do my best to help, and I hope we can connect the link between StarClan and the Clans once more."

Everyone began to disperse and Gorsebrush eyed Batchaser. "How long are you staying for, StarClanner?"

"As long as it takes," he responded, looking over at Cloudflame. "Where will I be staying?" It would be night soon, but it was already so dark in the pine forest that he couldn't completely tell. *It's sundown by now, I imagine*.

The medicine cat sighed. "Follow me." She led Batchaser across

camp and paused, glancing at an orange tabby apprentice eating a thrush next to the fresh-kill-pile. "Asterpaw. Go fetch our guest some new bedding."

She jumped to her paws and whirled around, blue eyes sparkling with excitement. "Of course, Cloudflame! I'll be right back!" The apprentice scurried off and Cloudflame rolled her eyes, padding into an empty den on the side of camp. "This is the nursery, but we have no kits or queens so you're free to stay in here for as long as you like."

"Thanks, Cloudflame," he murmured, dragging his paws into the den. Batchaser suddenly realized how tired he was, and wondered how he'd been able to keep up with the Clans for so long. *At least tonight I'll get some much needed sleep*..

"Here you go," Asterpaw called from the mouth of the cave. She waddled inside and dropped the soft bedding at Batchaser's paws, grinning. "It's- it's an honor to have you, sir!"

Sir? This is seriously weird. He only fake smiled in return and plopped into the nest as soon as the apprentice was gone. "I have a headache," he muttered, rubbing his temple with his paw.

"I'll give you some feverfew when you wake up," she said, then paused. "Batchaser, do you really think you can help us? Things.... they're bad right now."

"Don't worry about it, Cloudflame," he murmured, burying his muzzle into the soft nest. "I saved RiverClan and I'm not even a medicine cat.... I think I can fix my own Clan."

There was hesitation, but Cloudflame reluctantly accepted his words and turned to leave. Batchaser heard her walk away and sighed heavily, curling in on himself. *Let's hope I can*, he thought anxiously. *They seem to trust me, but Spiderstar is caught in her own world. I have to fix things before it's too late*... He thought about StarClan, and found himself missing home. *The sooner I get this over with, the sooner I can fix everything*...

That was the last soothing thought Batchaser would have in

ShadowClan.

A/N: Okay yes it's been a month I know I'm horrid. Anyway here it is! This did take me a while to start but I finished it in about 3~ days. Sorry if the ending wasn't great, either way I'm very excited to continue the story.

Thanks so much for reading! Please vote and comment your thoughts, and may StarClan light your path!✧

Chapter 39 || Mist

Tendrils of darkness wrapped over Batchaser, covering him in a damp coldness that felt eerily familiar. He flexed his talons and lashed his tail through dead air, eyes screwing open. He was met with pure black except for the speckles of stars twinkling in the sky. The darkness melted away into a pale green field, blades of grass crunching under his weight.

What the.... Batchaser frowned and slowly stood up, swaying from the sudden dizziness. He craned his muzzle toward the speckled sky - which looked so, so close - and hoisted himself on his hind legs, reaching a paw out. His claws glistened over the dapples of stars, but they immediately turned to dust under his touch. Batchaser coughed and reeled back, shaking his head to get the cloudiness out of his vision.

It wasn't cloudiness, though. Batchaser realized that mist had risen from the ground, covering the ground in a thick, heavy gray blanket. He slowly moved forward, motions awkward and choppy as if he were walking through a swamp. The mist was almost whispering, sliding around his feet and pulling at his fur. Batchaser hissed and leapt forward, a cloud of air puffing up around him.

"Batchaser!"

He recognized the voice immediately. The black tom turned his head over his shoulder and spotted Jackalstar at the mouth of the slope, staring up at him, more confused than ever. Batchaser bounded down toward her, swiping away the murmuring mist. "What's going on?" he asked.

Jackalstar shook her head. "I don't know," she admitted, gaze heavy and dark. "We need to find the others, though."

"*AHHHHHHHHH*!"

The two exchanged a glance. "Shellstar," they said in unison and

jogged toward the voice. Through the thickness of the haze, Batchaser could make out the blurred shape of a white tom leaping away from the mist at his paws.

"Shellstar!" Jackalstar snapped, garnering the black-striped tom's attention.

"What's happening?!"

"Just... I don't know!" She shook her head in exasperation. "Come with us – we need to find Galewhisker, Cypressfall, and Rushingpaw-"

"I'm here." Batchaser startled at the appearance of the gray tom, who'd blended in perfectly with the dull-colored world behind Shellstar.

"Agh...." An echoey voice pulled Batchaser's attention from Galewhisker and he turned, spotting Cypressfall. The calico she-cat trampled through the area, speeding up when she noticed the group. "Can someone tell me why the mist is trying to eat my paws?"

Batchaser shrugged.

"Wait–" She looked around, fur spiking. "Where's Rushingpaw?" Cypressfall dropped an accusatory glare at Batchaser.

The black tom threw his paws up in the air defensively. "He's staying in RiverClan, better than ever with his sisters. I guess he's not coming to these dreams anymore." That was probably better for everyone - they didn't need a small annoying cat to deal with in such a serious time.

Cypressfall puffed out a breath of air. Batchaser couldn't tell whether it was relieved or upset, deciding to glance at her before turning back to the rest of the group. *We're down one.... but how has everyone else been doing in their situations?* Maybe they'd been making progress already. Maybe they could even return home early!

"Galewhisker." Jackalstar sat down and ignored the mist tugging at the fur around her paws. Batchaser followed suit, and eventually,

so did the rest of the group. "Do you know what this place is?"

The gray tom hesitated, pale green gaze blinking back confusion. "I... I'm not sure, to be truthful. I've never seen this place before."

"This can't be StarClan, can it?" Shellstar asked, worried.

"Of course not!" Jackalstar hissed, but even her voice sounded flat and unsure. "I mean- this- this can't be StarClan already. We've been trying to save the Clans! Why would something like this happen?"

Batchaser screwed his eyes shut and momentarily blocked out the growing bickering among the group. *If this is already StarClan, then what is there left to do?* He frowned. *But I know cats that believe in StarClan. Sunpaw, Doestar, all of RiverClan, now most of ShadowClan.... how can we already be fading away if so many know we're real?*

Cypressfall lashed her tail through the mist, causing Batchaser to jerk and tune back into the conversation. "Maybe this isn't now- maybe it's a vision, or a sign of the future. I don't see anyone else, so how can it be StarClan?"

"Maybe everyone faded away," Shellstar panicked. "No! They can't have!"

Galewhisker frowned, not doing his usual duty in calming the former WindClan leader. "Maybe we should all talk about what we've done the past two weeks."

"I would like to hear what's happening in RiverClan," Cypressfall said suspiciously, "and why you've been there so long! Seriously. I've been idling around ThunderClan territory for a half moon, what have you and Rushingpaw been doing? Eating fish? We don't have room for wasted time!"

"Uh," Batchaser snapped, slightly offended. "No thanks to you, I've been helping RiverClan."

Jackalstar made a face. Shellstar and Galewhisker exchanged a glance.

"Oh, don't look so surprised!" The black tom batted at the grass under the blanket of mist, scowling.

Cypressfall grunted. "And what exactly *have* you two done?"

"Well, hardly thanks to Rushingpaw, I saved RiverClan from a sickness. The Blue Death!" Everyone looked confused and Batchaser waved them off. "Whatever, it doesn't matter. I had to act as a babysitter but we definitely have RiverClan on our side. In addition, I've moved them back into their original territory."

Jackalstar flexed her claws impatiently. "Fine," she huffed, "when you leave RiverClan we'll need some place to regroup. Formally talk about our next course of action."

"What about dreams?" Batchaser asked. "And I'm not-"

"Dreams are unpredictable," Galewhisker interrupted. "We cannot count on these visions bringing us together."

Batchaser narrowed his eyes at the tom. *Well, I guess no one needs to know I'm in ShadowClan now!*

Shellstar nodded gravely. "Then we must find a sheltered area to meet, where no one will see us. But where?"

"It needs to be somewhere out of sight but where we can all access..." Jackalstar shook her head. "I don't know. The Moonpool and Gathering Island are too far for anyone to walk."

Galewhisker shifted his gaze to the calico she-cat. "Cypressfall, can you think of any suitable places near ThunderClan? Behind them, perhaps?"

She shrugged. "There's a river running down for a pretty long time, not sure about good shelter though. A few tall trees."

Shellstar hummed thoughtfully. "I suppose we could climb a tree and speak up there."

Batchaser rolled his eyes. "What are we, *squirrels*? I'm not climbing a tree just to meet. We need to find somewhere better."

"And what do you suggest?" Jackalstar grumbled, scratching a paw over her ear.

The black tom shrugged. "I don't know, but we'll have to find something eventually, right?"

"We don't have time for eventually!" Galewhisker said, voice raising. Batchaser's eyes widened slightly and he looked at the usually calm and emotionless tom. Galewhisker whisked his tail back and forth. "If this is a vision of the future, then we don't have time to wait. We need to act *now*."

"How, though?" Cypressfall challenged. "Only RiverClan has been helped! There's still ShadowClan, and the rumors aren't good - and ThunderClan is more ambitious than ever. I can't keep holding them off with distractions and strange scent marks. Soon, they're going to strike."

Jackalstar pushed her paws into the ground anxiously, tearing at the grass with pearly-white claws. "What's their plan?"

Cypressfall frowned, hunching her shoulders forward. "From what I've heard, Doestar is planning to take over the rest of the territory - make one huge Clan, everyone under her reign."

"That's preposterous!" Shellstar snarled, leaping to his feet. "There have always been four Clans!"

"Not soon," Batchaser muttered.

Galewhisker looked worried. "If Doestar succeeds with her plan, then I fear StarClan will disappear forever."

The weight of his words hung in the air, heaving down on Batchaser's shoulders. What could they do? *We need to unite the other Clans somehow - take down the tyranny in ThunderClan, reverse the mindset that's been placed there*. It was certainly easier said than done. "RiverClan is growing stronger," the black tom hesitantly offered. Jackalstar narrowed her eyes at him. "Applestar is behind my command, and they have a strong deputy. I'm in ShadowClan now-"

"Did anyone tell you to go to ShadowClan?" Shellstar snapped.

Batchaser glared at the white and black tom. "What, like I'd take orders from a cat that killed me?" Shellstar's eyes widened and he froze, apparently becoming a mute. "ShadowClan is weak. They have no loyalty, no ambition, hardly enough warriors to fill camp. There's no rock holding them in place - and I'm going to try, but without a deputy, and with a clueless leader...." The tom shook his head hopelessly. "I don't know if I can help them before Doestar's plan is initiated."

Jackalstar growled and slammed her paw into the ground, beginning to furiously pace back and forth. "I can't help because I'm stuck in WindClan," she growled.

"I can," Cypressfall offered with a small shrug.

The white and brown she-cat looked at Cypressfall. "You need to continue distracting ThunderClan to buy us time."

"Jackalstar, they're not taking the bait. Their interest is on the other Clans, not a rogue that hasn't even taken much food. And even at the tail-end of leaf-fall, they still have enough prey to feed their entire Clan twice over." Cypressfall sighed. "There's nothing more I can do."

"The best thing we can do is let leaf-bare take its course," Galewhisker said quietly. "Then, maybe we'll have a chance to stop them."

Jackalstar shook her head. "Stop them how? We can't attack our former Clan!"

"They're hardly a Clan!" Batchaser growled back. "They have an insane leader and they all blindly follower her like a bunch of mindless sheep. We *have* to attack!"

"What, in leaf-bare, when the other Clans are starving and hungry?" Shellstar growled. "I can't let that happen to WindClan again."

"Last I checked," Batchaser spat, "you weren't WindClan leader

anymore."

"Just-" Galewhisker puffed out a small breath of air, silencing the others. "We need a plan. A good one. Us arguing here while valuable time passes isn't going to help anyone. I suggest we think of something to do and meet up in a dream in a few days."

"And with me in ShadowClan, I think I'll come up with a few ideas," Cypressfall said.

Whatever. Batchaser blinked slowly and saw the stars in the sky begin to burst into balls of shadows, effectively covering the sky in a dark blanket. The ground began to fade away under his paws and he realized the dream, or the vision, or whatever this was, was ending. The tom closed his eyes, relaxed his body, and the eeriness of the area was replaced with a warm, cozy nest.

Batchaser jerked back in surprise, not having expected to wake up so quickly. The tom opened his jaws into a yawn, rubbing at his eyes. *Mmm.*. He had a lot to think about, mostly his annoyance at having to deal with Cypressfall if she really came. *Great. It's just like the Forgotten Eternity all over again*.

Muttering under his breath, Batchaser slowly lifted himself from his nest and was nearly blown over by the cold draft that filled the cave. *When did it get so* freezing*?* The tom poked his head out of the den and squinted against the harsh wind lapping against his face, blowing back his whiskers as he stood. Thick sheets of clouds covered the once clear sky, small white flecks falling to the ground.

Oh. It was *snowing*.

"Batchaser! Batchaser!" The tom's ears flicked and he turned his head, raising a brow as Asterpaw raced up to him. The ginger she-cat's blue eyes glistened. "It's snowing!"

"No, really?" he said sarcastically.

"Yeah!" she replied, unaware that he'd been facetious. *So much like Rushingpaw*... With a pang, the tom walked past Asterpaw and plopped down at the fresh-kill-pile, ignoring her completely. *How in*

the world am I supposed to fix ShadowClan when I don't even know where their leader is? Even Applestar had been easier to talk to than Spiderstar.

"Batchaser!" He groaned and dragged his paws away from the measly pile of prey, fixing his dark gaze on Cloudflame. Asterpaw looked as well.

"What?" he grunted.

"Asterpaw! With me. Hunting patrol." A golden tabby tom walked past the black tom and flicked his tail, motioning for Asterpaw to follow.

"Aww. I can't spend the day with Batchaser?" she asked.

"Sorry," the golden tom shrugged. "Cloudflame wants us out of camp." He dipped his head to the medicine cat.

"Brindlespark," she said, smiling softly. Asterpaw padded behind her mentor, tail dragging in the dirt. "Would you mind bringing along.... hmm, Redgrowl and Furryflank."

"Furryflank is already out," Brindlespark frowned.

Cloudflame looked surprised. "Really? For what?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. Snowytail suggested they mark the borders since Batchaser is here now, so no one forgets we're a Clan again. She and Granitepaw went along."

The medicine cat growled. "Fine, take whoever you want." She whirled on her paws and stalked back into the medicine den, white tail-tip disappearing into the darkness.

Batchaser clicked his tongue awkwardly and motioned toward the medicine den. "So- um- yeah, I guess I'll just- yep."

"Wait, who else do we take?" Brindlespark asked.

Batchaser made a face. "Why are you asking *me*?"

"Umm...." He shifted on his paws. "You're from StarClan, so..."

Ugh. Why did I even say I was from StarClan? Batchaser shrugged and pointed to a gray tom with black stripes that emerged from the warriors' den. "Take him."

"Ashleap?" Brindlespark hummed and turned away. "Let's go, then." Ashleap realized his name had been called and hurried after the mentor and apprentice.

Well.... Batchaser moved his paws toward the medicine den and blinked through the swath of shadows, noticing a shape in the corner of the den. "Cloudflame?"

"No. It's just me." A slightly gruff, amused voice caught Batchaser's attention and he tilted his head. Gorsebrush stared back with a pale green eye.

"Oh," he said.

Gorsebrush laughed. "I've never heard a cat so disappointed to speak to an elder."

"Oh, it's not-" Batchaser's ear tips burned with embarrassment as he stumbled over his words. "Sorry, I'm just looking for Cloudflame."

"There's a hole in the back of the cave," Gorsebrush smiled, pointing toward the dip in the ground that lead to Cloudflame's part of the den. "Pretty sure she stomped off. Good luck talking to her in that mood."

Batchaser grunted. "Wonderful." He picked his way across the cave and peered down, hoping there weren't spiders or anything. "Thanks, Gorsebrush."

"Wait-" The black tom turned and warily eyed the elder. "This may sound naive, but are you really going to help the Clan? Or are you here for something else?"

"What do you mean?" Batchaser frowned and sat down.

"Well, I'd understand if you're only using ShadowClan to get to ThunderClan - after all, they are the heart of the prophecy-"

"*What*?" Batchaser seethed, jumping to his paws and glaring at the old tom. "Why would you even question my loyalty to ShadowClan? I would never do something so- so selfish! I wouldn't hurt that many other cats for the sake of saving ThunderClan."

The black tom immediately faltered once his own words rang in his ears. *I did use someone, though. I did something horribly selfish just for the sake of making myself feel better. Just for the sake of enacting revenge. I used Paleheart, and now, because of me, the Clans are in disarray.*

Gorsebrush blinked at him then twitched his whiskers. "I see you haven't lost any of your fire."

Batchaser sighed. "Sorry. I didn't mean to snap."

"That was more like a rant, but either way, I accept your apology. I'm sorry if I was intruding or rude. I shouldn't have questioned your motives." Batchaser squinted, trying to detect if there were any hidden meanings under Gorsebrush's words. He couldn't tell.

"Well, I'll be back," he muttered. "Feel better, I... guess..?" Without waiting for an answer, Batchaser plunged head-first into Cloudflame's den, shifting his body through cracks in the rocks where a shaft of light streamed in. He found the cleft and used his paws to scrabble through, breaking some of the wet earth. His paws fell on pine needles and he breathed in the fresh forest air, masses of trees above blocking out most of the snow falling from the sky. Batchaser closed his eyes. *Home.*

But he wanted to find Cloudflame more than anything now. She'd called to him earlier, so maybe she had an idea? Perhaps she needed help? Batchaser wasn't going to take Gorsebrush's advice and leave her be; he didn't really care whether she was snappy or not. *Just gotta find her.*

Opening his jaws, Batchaser caught the hint of a scent trail and

began to follow, paws sending needles and small leaves flurrying elsewhere. His fur bushed to keep himself warm and realized the scent was growing closer. *Good.* The black tom emerged from the forest into a clearing, where a small rise in the ground lead toward the edge of a mound. Batchaser narrowed his eyes and lifted himself to the top, scanning the flattened ground below. He realized he was almost out of ShadowClan territory, out to the north. *Hmmm...*

The crackling of twigs stole Batchaser's attention. He turned his head back and glared into the darkness of the pine forest, willing Cloudflame to appear. When he tasted the air, however, her scent was gone.

Batchaser's blood went cold. The tom looked around, the sudden feeling of unease dropping like rocks in his belly. Before he could make another glance around the clearing, a sharp pair of claws dug into his back and forced him to the ground. Batchaser yelped and hardly registered what was happening, paws flailing uselessly. The weight on top of his back lessened just slightly, but by then he was tumbling over the side of the small, steep hill, body flattening the speckles of snow on the ground.

A voice rang in his ears but Batchaser couldn't hear it. He felt the cold trickle of blood on his back and wondered if this was it, if he was going to die here before he could even complete his mission. A heavy thud on his side jerked him back into consciousness and he saw large black paws in front of him, pearly-white claws glinting with blood.

"So, *Batchaser*," a harsh voice whispered in his ear, causing him to shiver. "What brings you back to ShadowClan?"

A/N: Another wait, but we've kind of been expecting that lol. Anyway, I actually really enjoyed writing the second half. The cold season always motivates me, and with leaf-bare falling upon the Clans, I'm even more excited! A lot of things are going to happen, and this story is far from finished, so make sure to stay tuned for next chapter!

Please vote and comment your thoughts, and may StarClan light your path!

Chapter 40 || Flashes Through Time

This is a long one, guys.

Please heed this:
□trigger warning□

I'm not kidding, either. Lots of dark stuff buried in here, but it's necessary to tell Batchaser's backstory. If you're still here and ready to move on, good luck.

_____

"Agh..." Batchaser groaned from the heavy weight on top of his back, body flattening under the she-cat. His eyes were screwed shut, claws sinking into the damp ground below him. Everything in his body was sore and pained, and all Batchaser wanted was a nice, long nap in StarClan. But that certainly wasn't happening any time soon.

"Well?" the voice prompted impatiently. Batchaser's eyes snapped open and he suddenly swiped his paw back, catching the cat in the face. She snarled and fell over, cursing under her breath. Finding his footing, Batchaser leapt out of her hold and flicked blood from his ears, gaze wide and unfocused.

And dear StarClan, the cat was *Spiderstar*.

Up close she was even larger, shaggy black fur broadening her size. Her eyes were a sharp yellow, like moonlight cast upon a shadowy forest, an amber glint fogging over her gaze. Her claws were long and sharp, and upon further inspection of her body, Batchaser could see the long scars drawn over her black pelt.

"You didn't answer me," Spiderstar said, slowly picking herself to her paws.

"Maybe I would've, if you hadn't *attacked* me!" Batchaser spat, heart beating irregularly in his chest. He hated Clan cats sometimes. *Seriously. Some of them just need to die already!*

"I wanted to make an entrance." A wide grin spread across Spiderstar's cheeks, but Batchaser saw far too many teeth. *I don't trust her at all*, he realized.

"Yeah, well." Batchaser's voice fell flat, and when he looked back at Spiderstar, something flashed in front of his eyes. A memory, so distant and tilted that he wasn't even sure if it was real....

The haze widened into a black silhouette, outlined in splattered silver lines. A grove of trees flanked the outside area, grass soft and tufted under his paws. The shadow moved forward and blood-red claws slid out, a crooked smile spreading across the cat's dark face.

"I-" Batchaser stepped back when he realized Spiderstar had inched closer, gazing at him like he was some sort of anomaly. "What was that?"

She was quiet for a moment. "You don't remember." It was less of a question - a statement, sharp and piercing.

"Remember what-?"

Batchaser was thrown back into the vision. He realized he was in a den, and a fluffy brown shape moved beside him. "Batkit!" she exclaimed, green eyes peering into his.

Adderkit. My dear sister, his heart whispered, and the memory was so sudden and painful he doubled over. Spiderstar looked down at him, thick, scarred tail twitching. "You're remembering."

Batchaser shook his head desperately, paws flying to his head. "No," he said brokenly. "I can't. I can't relive any of that." Batchaser lifted his head and his expression drew into a snarl. "How do you even know what's happening to me?!"

"Because I've seen it. I keep seeing you in my dreams."

Batchaser scowled. "Okay, that's creepy. You know what else is

creepy? You!"

"It's because we're *here*." Her voice dropped to a whisper and Spiderstar cast her gaze around the clearing. "When you return, we'll talk about everything."

Batchaser's eyes widened. "Wait, what do you mean when I return-?!"

He was thrust into another memory, space and time flying by his peripheral vision. He was Batkit again, staring up at his father's cold blue eyes. A paw swiped into vision and harshly toppled him to the ground, Batkit's scream bouncing inside his skull.

A chorus of angry voices faded into another memory, one where he and Adderkit put burrs in Dappletail's nest. Fallenstar had been so angry, but nothing constituted the rage of his father. Batkit and his sister were taken out of camp in the middle of the night and he watched Cedartuft mutilate a rabbit. He was sure he'd never forget the blood dripping from his father's claws, the dead look in the rabbit's eyes as Cedartuft ripped its head off. "This is what I'll do to you if you ever disrespect me again."

"B-but Dad-" Adderkit yelped when Cedartuft slammed his paw down on her shoulder. She squirmed under his grasp, eyes wide and terrified. "H-how is p-pulling a prank on our- our Clanmates disrespecting you-?"

"Because!" Cedartuft snarled, spit flying from his lips, "if you're disrespecting your Clanmates you're disrespecting me. My image. Do you think I wanted kits?"

Adderkit began to cry. Cedartuft silenced her with a slap to the face. "Shut up! You'll wake the whole camp with your whining. Come on."

Batkit held his sister close. She sobbed into his neck fur and Cedartuft glared down at both of them. "If you ever tell anyone - even your mother - about what you saw tonight, I'll make sure that rabbit is you next time."

The vision faded into another. His mother, Finchcall, had started to become more and more distant, and Batkit's memories of his father's

abuse distanced into a fog. The only thing he remembered from that night with Adderkit was the killing of the rabbit, and nothing else.

He and Adderkit became apprentices. The abuse passed from Cedartuft to Bearmask, and Batpaw found himself fighting to even wake up due to his mentor's harsh words and merciless training. Adderpaw grew hardened, the jokes and pranks from Batpaw's childhood disappearing with whatever else Adderpaw had lost.

The day had fallen to night, and Silverpelt glimmered over ShadowClan's camp. Batpaw picked his way to the nursery under the blanket of darkness, face morphing into one of confusion. Finchcall was still awake. "Mom?" he whispered, voice gentle.

She didn't move. Batpaw slid forward and pressed a paw to her flank. Finchcall jerked away, green eyes glassy and clouded. "Don't touch me!"

"Mom-" Batpaw stared at her, shocked. Something akin to hurt pounded beneath his flesh, blood chilling. "I- what do you mean?"

"I didn't do anything," she said, shaking her head desperately. "Please. Don't hurt me."

"Mom, I'd never hurt you!" Batpaw began to tremble. A memory flashed - his father's claws dripping with blood, but he couldn't remember exactly where it came from.

Finchcall stared at him for a moment, hackles lowering. "Mom?" she echoed, rolling the word over her tongue like it was foreign. "Batpaw?"

"Yes," he sobbed, pushing himself into his mother's brown fur. "You scared me. I- I thought-"

Finchcall shushed him, wrapping her plumy brown tail around his scrawny body. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry," she repeated, eyes screwing shut. "I didn't know it was you."

"Who did y- you think I was?" Batpaw stuttered. Why was his mother so scared? Who was hurting her?

But his mother just shook her head. "Don't worry about it, love," she

whispered. Her paw found its way to his flank and he froze when Finchcall brushed over a scar under his fur. The she-cat stiffened and blinked at him. "What is that?"

"N- nothing," Batpaw said, scrambling away.

"No. It isn't nothing." Finchcall's voice hardened slightly. "Who did that to you?"

His heart dropped. Was he really going to have to say it? Batpaw pushed his weight between both paws, shuffling his feet. "I made Bearmask angry... but I deserved it. I forgot my hunting crouch and we lost a squirrel. It was my fault, I should've-"

Finchcall curled her paws around his neck and pulled him into a hug. He eventually relaxed against her warmth, a cry wrenching from his throat.

"I'm sorry," he whispered.

"Nonsense," his mother said quickly, licking his ear. "Don't be sorry. You didn't deserve anything. I'll talk to Bearmask tomorrow, okay?"

"Okay," Batpaw replied, nodding into her pelt. Everything was going to be fine.

The vision swirled into another, not too long after Batpaw's heart-to-heart with his mother. Bearmask has become less physical with Batpaw, but still tried to nick him from time to time. At least his mother had tried, right?

Then he began training with Adderpaw and her mentor, Pinestorm. Tension between Finchcall and Cedartuft only grew. "Hey," Batpaw said after a training session, falling into step with his sister. "Do you know what's going on with Mom and Dad?"

Adderpaw looked at him, ringed brown tail lashing. "You don't want to know."

Batpaw squinted at her. "What do you mean? Do you know something?"

"Don't worry. It's just family drama - things happen. So stop being nosy." Adderpaw ended the conversation with a leap into camp, retreating into the apprentices' den.

Batpaw began to watch his parents more. Every time Cedartuft marched up to Finchcall - and marched *was not an exaggeration - she flinched away from him. Cedartuft stood uncharacteristically close to her, too. Batpaw grew more worried, especially when his mother's health began to deteriorate. She was always in and out of the medicine den, and neither Hickoryflight nor Cloudpaw knew what to do.*

The last line for Batpaw was when he visited Finchcall in the nursery again. She looked over at him, slightly disoriented, and tilted her head. "Are you here to see the new kits?"

Batpaw looked over at Shadedfern and the kits suckling on her side. "No," he said, slightly confused, and returned his gaze to Finchcall. "I'm here for-"

"Their names are Ghostkit, Amberkit, and Bluekit," Finchcall interrupted with a purr. "Sometimes I wish I had kits."

Batpaw froze. Chips of ice speckled his blood and his fur stood on end. "Wh- what?"

Finchcall rolled her eyes. "Oh, don't look so surprised. I know Branchtuft and I never worked out, but there's still time for me!"

"Mom," Batpaw croaked, shoulders slumping. He stared at her, genuinely unable to comprehend what was happening. Did she not remember him? "It's me. Batpaw."

"That's a nice name," Finchcall nodded. "I've always wanted to have a son named Batkit. My grandfather's name was Batstalker - one of the most influential senior warriors at the time of Willowstar and Softstar's war-"

"I don't care!" Batpaw exploded. He jumped to his paws, claws flicking in and out of their sheaths. "I'm Batpaw! The son of you and Cedartuft! Do you not remember me?!"

Finchcall laughed. "Cedartuft? I'm sorry, but I would never *be with*

him! Any RiverClan cat from Softstar's reign cannot be trusted, whether or not he's in ShadowClan now."

Batpaw backed away, shaking his head. "I- I can't- I can't do this." He turned tail and sped from camp, pine trees towering over his head. Leaves crackled under his paws, a cold draft sifting through his fur. Batpaw harshly breathed through his nose, tears leaking out of his eyes. He didn't understand what was wrong with his mother. How could she not remember him?

"....Batpaw..... Batpaw...!"

He swiveled his ears in the direction of the calls, blue eyes widening. Adderpaw. *The brown tabby she-cat's voice grew closer until she emerged from the foliage, blinking back at her brother. "Batpaw?"*

"What?" he mumbled, tail flicking angrily.

Adderpaw frowned. "What's wrong? Why'd you run out of camp?"

Batpaw glared at her, a scowl forming on his face. "Why do you care? After all, it's just family drama*." He spit the words out like they were poison. "Just go, Adderpaw."*

His sister wasn't known for being obedient, though. "No." She slid forward and sat beside him, tufted ear tips flicking away a gnat. "What happened?"

Batpaw looked away. I don't think I can say it. *Shaking his head, he shrugged hopelessly. "Mom."*

Adderpaw's gaze hardened. "What did she say?"

He began to tremble again, unable to meet his sister's gaze. "She didn't even know who I was. Her own son! And she didn't know me!" His voice rose into a broken wail.

Adderpaw was quiet as Batpaw sniffled. He eventually stood up, aggravated. "It doesn't matter. Just go away."

"No, I-" Adderpaw's voice died in her throat. She lifted herself to her paws, wavering. "I know what's wrong with her."

Batpaw's head swiveled toward her. "What?" he demanded. "What is it? How do we fix her?"

But Adderpaw was already shaking her head. "We can't."

"What do you mean we can't?!"

"It isn't possible!" she snapped, teeth baring. "It's all Dad's fault- if we can even call *him a father."*

"Cedartuft?" Batpaw said, shocked. No. He didn't do anything. *"Why are you blaming him? It's obvious Mom is..." He waved his paws. "Messed up or something!"*

"Yeah, because of him*!" Adderpaw stomped forward and pointed to her shoulder, where two scars curled over her fur. "Where do you think I got this scar from?"*

Batpaw's mouth went dry. "N- no, you scratched it on a tree, remember?"

"No!" Adderpaw snarled. "I think I'd know where my scar came from, thank you very much. Remember when we put burrs in Old Dappletail's nest?"

The memory was there, but it was vague. "I- I mean, yeah, Fallenstar was really mad at us because Old Dapple ratted us out-"

"But Cedartuft *was even angrier." Adderpaw began to pace back and forth. "He took us out of camp at night - remember? He beheaded the rabbit in front of us, then said we would end up that way if we disrespected him again?"*

"N- no, no, no," Batpaw whispered, shaking his head desperately. He remembered the rabbit, remembered the blood dripping from glinting white claws, the crooked smile hidden behind his father's mask. But it couldn't be true. Maybe it'd been a hunting accident gone wrong. But why did he take us with him? *Shivering, Batpaw stepped back. "What does this have to do with Mom?"*

Adderpaw faced her brother. "He-" She hesitated, seemingly weighing her options. "Batpaw, he hurts Mom. Abuses her."

It felt like the world fell out around him. Batpaw froze, shocked, and stared back at Adderpaw. "Wh- what?" he stuttered nervously. "What do you mean, abuses *her?"*

"He claws her, Batpaw!" Adderpaw yelled, bushy tail lashing. "Are you dumb? Haven't you seen?"

"No!" he exclaimed. "Why would he do something like that? I- I don't even remember the night you're talking about!" He did, though. Still, maybe pretending like it didn't happen would make the pain go away.

"Liar!" Adderpaw spat. She reared her paws forward and slashed Batpaw's cheek. He hissed and reeled away, fumbling over his feet. What in StarClan's name is she doing? *Batpaw leapt out of the way when his sister barreled for him, narrowly missing the snap of her jaws.*

"Stop it!" he cried.

"Not until you listen to me!" Wasting no time, Adderpaw whirled around and clamped her teeth around Batpaw's leg, pulling his weight out from under him. She pinned him to the ground but Batpaw was stealthier, batting an unsheathed paw up towards her chin to knock her away. He scrambled back, gaze glassy and unsteady. Adderpaw glared at him. "Why won't you listen to me?"

"Because you're talking nonsense!" Batpaw exclaimed, chest heaving with every breath. "This- this isn't you. Just calm down!"

"I can't calm down when my own brother *won't listen to me!" she screamed back. Batpaw suddenly realized how small and vulnerable she looked, tears dribbling down her cheeks. He paused, claws sinking into the ground to hold himself. She was telling the truth, but it was something Batpaw didn't want to hear.*

"I'm sorry," is all he could say, mouth dry.

Adderpaw shook her head. "You'll remember this day, Batpaw, and then you'll see his true colors. Just like I have time and time again."

Batpaw closed his eyes. "Don't be dramatic." He forced the words past his jaws, and they hurt to hear. When he looked at Adderpaw again, she appeared to be completely shattered.

"Goodbye." Flicking her tail, his sister turned and disappeared into the foliage, nettles and brambles camouflaging her brown pelt.

Adderpaw didn't return to the apprentices' den that night. He figured she was out alone, thinking, and maybe looking to apologize. After all, she'd been the one to attack him! Batpaw decided not to think about her anymore and eventually fell asleep. When he awoke in the morning, Adderpaw's nest was cold. Something worked tightly in his stomach.

Something's wrong.

He leapt head-first out of the den, splattered pink and orange light outlining the patrol that was trudging into camp. On Fallowpike's shoulder slumped a dark brown shape, completely unmoving. Batpaw's blood went cold and he couldn't move, couldn't speak, couldn't breathe. He watched Fallenstar leap down from the Leader's Branch, muscles rippling under white and orange tabby fur. "What is this?"

Fallowpike frowned and gently leaned down, letting the cat roll off of his back. Batpaw flinched when he saw the dead, clouded haze in Adderpaw's eyes. "We.... found her hanging on a vine on one of the trees." The warrior stepped back, deeply disturbed. "It looks like she's been there all night."

"No," Batpaw whispered.

"My baby! My baby, Adderpaw!" A shape flung itself from the nursery and next to his sister's deceased form, shoulders heaving with heavy sobs. Batpaw watched his mother break, and he was sure the cracks were spreading to him, rotting through his chest. "What happened?! What did he do?!"

What did he *do. Batpaw staggered off to the side and flopped to the ground, jaws widening as he threw up.* Oh, dear StarClan. *It was true. All of it was true. A wail formed in Batpaw's throat as he laid there on the ground, broken and unmoving.* I could've stopped this. I could've stopped her from... from.... if only I'd told her I remembered!

But it was too late, and his sister was dead.

A quarter moon later and Batpaw was standing atop one of the rocks

in camp, face outlined by the silver glow of the moon. Silverpelt splattered across the sky, stars twinkling brightly. "Are you happy now?" he mumbled bitterly, tail lashing.

A dark shape moved on Batpaw's side. He whirled his head around and spotted.... his mother. "Mom?"

"Hi." Finchcall joined him on the tall, flat stone, following his gaze to the sky. "What are you doing?"

"Talking to Adderpaw."

His mother visibly flinched. "Oh," was all she said.

Silence spread between them. Batpaw twitched his ears and looked at his mother, face drawn into a frown. "Are you okay?" His eyes widened when he spotted the smear of blood on her cheek, deep clawmarks marring her fur. "Wh- what happened?"

Finchcall closed her green eyes, clearly pained. "I never wanted you to know."

He stared at her. "Cedartuft."

She turned to him in surprise. "You.... know?"

"Adderpaw told me before..." Batpaw trailed off. "I didn't know. I swear I didn't know she was going to do what she did."

"Hush." Finchcall wrapped her tail around his body, pressing him into her side. "It wasn't your fault. I'm... afraid she saw more than you did - saw more of who your father really is. And I don't think she could live with that."

Batpaw began to tremble, and the emotions swirled in his chest, sudden and roaring and angry. "I'm sorry," he spluttered. He turned his head and sobbed into her soft brown fur. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry...."

"Love. Hey. Look at me." Finchcall pushed his chin up with her paw. "Remember that I always love you. I always will, no matter what happens. You must *know that."*

Batpaw nodded. "I- I know. I know, Mom." He forced his cries back down his throat. Something about his mother's words sounded disturbingly familiar. "Why... why are you telling me this?"

Finchcall slumped, a pained smile forming its way on her cheeks. "I can't stay here anymore, love. It isn't safe for me. And I..." She shook her head. "I can't keep living in that nursery, in this camp, in this forest *where my baby- where-" She broke off. "He killed her, Batpaw. Cedartuft killed my baby, and now he's going to destroy you, and I can't watch my life fall apart anymore."*

Batpaw jerked back as if he'd been struck. "You're leaving*?" His words took on more force than he'd intended, but the anger was there, hot and brewing. "How could you do that to me? How could you leave me with* him*?"*

Finchcall turned her head away. "Because I'm a coward, and you're not."

"So Adderpaw was a coward?" Batpaw's voice grew hard. "What's wrong with you? Why are you all so selfish*?!"*

"Batpaw, stop!" she cried, flinching away. "I can't stay here! It's done. I never belonged in this Clan, anyway."

"What, so- so- so you're going to leave? Go into the forest and probably end up dead at the paws of a badger or a fox? Is that really the life you want to live?!" Batpaw took a deep breath, labored breathing pushing harshly against his chest. "What did I do to you to make you leave? Do you think it's my fault? You didn't even remember me! You didn't know your own son*!" He began to sob, completely breaking down. "Did you know Cedartuft took me and Adderkit out one night and mutilated a rabbit in front of us? Then said we would end up like that if we disrespected him again? If we told you anything? Did you know?" The memories rushed back, dark and painful. "DID YOU?!"*

Finchcall was deathly silent. Batpaw stumbled back, crying into his paws. It felt like his whole life was falling apart, like the earth was going to swallow him whole. His mother stepped forward then hesitated. "I'm.... I'm sorry, Batpaw."

He saw a flash of Adderpaw and himself, standing in the forest clearing. 'I'm sorry. Don't be dramatic.' The words hurt so, so badly. "J-just leave," Batpaw spat angrily. "I don't want to see you ever again."

Finchcall had a horribly broken expression in her blue eyes. "Batp-"

"LEAVE!" he screamed.

His mother took a deep breath and nodded. "Then.... so be it. Goodbye, son. I hope you find the life you deserve." With that, Finchcall turned and bounded down the rocks, disappearing from the mouth of camp.

Batpaw didn't watch her leave.

Moons passed after the death of Adderpaw and the disappearance of his mother. Batpaw refused to speak to Cedartuft, intent on believing he had ruined their lives. It was him. Everything was his fault. *The anger gradually turned into rage, until one day he snapped and attacked his father on a border patrol. Fallenstar had been furious, but Batpaw didn't care - the fearful expression in Cedartuft's eyes had been enough to satisfy him. "You little monster," his father eventually growled as they walked back to camp.*

Batpaw whirled around, Lynxpaw and Pepperflight physically restrained him. "I hate you!" he screamed. "You killed Adderpaw and Finchcall! It should've been you*!"*

Fallenstar had a talk with Batpaw after the ordeal. He'd be cleaning out the elders' ticks for another moon - and his warrior ceremony would be held back, as it was meant to be held in a few days. Batpaw genuinely didn't care anymore.

When he returned to the apprentices' den, Lynxpaw looked up at him, amusement glimmering in her sky-blue eyes. "That was quite a show, Batpaw."

"Leave me alone," he growled. The black tom sunk into his nest, curling his thin tail around his scrawny body.

A *shadow covered the partial sunshine through his eyelids. "C'mon. Want to talk about it?"*

Batpaw ignored her.

"Hmph." Lynxpaw flopped to the ground. "Fine. Then I'll just sit here until you do."

"Wear yourself out."

Lynxpaw hummed. "Did he do something to you? Why don't you like him? I mean, everyone knows about your family, but-"

Pain and anger exploded in Batpaw's chest. He threw himself to his feet and shoved Lynxpaw away. "Go bother someone else!" he snarled, fur bristling along his back. "My father is a terrible cat. He killed my family, and he deserves every bad thing that comes to him!"

Lynxpaw stared at him. "Are you done?"

Batpaw glared back. "Don't. Talk. To. Me." He turned away from her and dropped back down in his nest, flicking his ears down to block out her rambling.

Life gradually got better, though. Batpaw finished his punishment in the elders' den and became a warrior alongside Lynxpaw, who was a moon younger. Batchaser and Lynxbite. That somehow felt right.

Lynxbite had also managed to gradually work her way into Batchaser's heart. The anger and pain of his past began to dissipate, and he realized how much he loved her.

"Be with me," she suddenly said on a hunting patrol, just the two of them side-by-side.

Batchaser jerked back, surprised. "What?"

Lynxbite turned toward him. "Be my mate."

His heart unexpectedly burst with joy. Batchaser's eyes widened and a wide grin formed on his cheeks. "Yes. Yes, I- I-"

She smirked. "Love me?"

"Yes." Batchaser was breathless.

"Good."

So, the two new mates cherished their new relationship, and surprisingly, their Clanmates congratulated them.

But with leaf-fall came clear blue skies, and with leaf-bare came a harsh, relentless snow. Many of Batchaser's Clanmates caught Greencough - Fallenstar, Toadsong, Fallowpike, and Cedartuft. *Fallenstar lost a life and Toadsong was lucky enough to recover. Fallowpike, however, passed in his sleep.*

Cedartuft. One day, Batchaser pushed his paws through the thick snow, white flakes falling around him. He shook his black fur out and entered the medicine den, nodding at Cloudflame. In the back of the den was Cedartuft, gray fur matted and ice blue eyes crusted. "Mmmm..?" He groaned softly. "Cloudflame?"

"No." Batchaser's voice was full of cold steel, unbreakable. He stood calmly, looking down at his father. "It's me. Your son."

Cedartuft froze, an indescribable expression on his ugly face. "Oh."

"Listen." Batchaser breathed in thickly. "You will not control my life or emotions any longer. You've hurt me, my sister, my mother, and all because you're selfish. *I can't even call you a father - you're less than one. Maybe the worst in the world." He shook with anger but controlled himself. Memories of his father's violence flashed back, and looking down on him, Batchaser realized how weak and scared Cedartuft really was. "I'm happy you're going to die. And I hope that you wake up and find yourself in the Dark Forest, where you'll be tortured over and over again for the rest of eternity." He stepped back, trembling. "Goodbye, Cedartuft." With that, Batchaser turned away, trudged back up the slope, and flopped next to Lynxbite in the warriors' den.*

Cedartuft died the next day.

Life still went on, and it seemed like things were only getting better. It was a sore thought, but perhaps losing his family had been the only thing to build him up - to reach the 'life he deserved,' as his mother had so eloquently stated. That being said, Batchaser was absolutely ecstatic *when Lynxbite broke the news.*

She was pregnant.

Seventeen moons old and Batchaser was going to have kits. The image of their children running around their feet, growing into good, strong warriors changed his entire perception of life. Unlike Finchcall, he would never abandon them, and unlike Cedartuft, Batchaser would never *hurt his kits or his mate.*

Except.... Lynxbite didn't seem as excited as he was. Her expression was muted, dull, face sunken in from what Batchaser assumed was stress and a lack of sleep. She was shaping up to be a great warrior, and gossip was spreading quickly - would Lynxbite become the next deputy of ShadowClan?

Batchaser gradually noticed his mate's change in personality as the pregnancy continued. While they'd once enjoyed hunting patrols together, running side by side through the foliage, Lynxbite refused to leave. If they were *put on patrol, she would often scratch Batchaser for saying something about their "future kits." Her belly had rounded and the promise of children was there, but.... Lynxbite was* different *now.*

"Lynxbite?" Batchaser finally gathered the courage to ask about their relationship one night, stars spreading out like cobwebs in the navy sky. "Are we... okay?"

She looked at him in surprise. "Of course. Why wouldn't we be?"

That filled Batchaser with even more *confusion. Perhaps he was being dumb, but something didn't add up here. "I just-" He touched the faded outline of clawmarks on his shoulder blade, where Lynxbite had gotten angry about Batchaser's name choice. "It feels like something has changed."*

Lynxbite shifted on her paws uncomfortably. "Well, of course it's changed. We have.... kits*... on the way." Batchaser flinched back when Lynxbite spat out the word 'kits.' It all clicked together, and gears began turning in his mind.*

"Oh," he said miserably. Batchaser staggered back slightly, eyes screwing shut. "You don't want my kits, do you?"

There was a thread of silence where Batchaser so hopefully wanted his mate to deny his claims, tell him he was being silly, that of course *she'd want his kits. But... nothing came. When he opened his eyes, Lynxbite was faced away, tail lashing back and forth. "No. I don't." Her voice was harsher than he'd ever heard before, full of malice and contempt. "I never wanted kits. I thought you knew that."*

*Batchaser's eyes widened. "*Me*? What in StarClan's name are you talking about?"*

"I know you wanted this!" Lynxbite spat, whirling around. "Didn't you? You wanted me to get pregnant, just so you could swoop in and 'save' me! So that you could build your happy little family after yours was offed one by one! Well, guess what? I don't want children! Especially not with you*!"*

The words cut off Batchaser's air circulation. That familiar feeling of grief and terror returned, rotting cracks thrumming through his chest. He could hear his own heartbeat echoing in his ears, and the swirled voices of his lost family members bounced back.

Lynxbite stared at him for a moment longer, then promptly turned away, bounding into the foliage nestling around the pine trees. Batchaser tried to shake the memories away and lifted his paws, making chase after his mate, if that's what they even were anymore. "Lynxbite!" His voice was so small and fragile. Does she hear me?

Picking up his pace, Batchaser dug his claws into the leaf-strewn ground. "Lynxbite!" he called again, this time louder. He could no longer hear her heavy pants as she ran, though. That familiar feeling twinged in his stomach. No. No. No! *He desperately whirled his head from side to side, trying to locate her.* She's pregnant with your kits! Why did you let her run away? *"Lynxbite!"*

A gurgled scream caused Batchaser's ears to swivel in that direction. She was out of the territory. Why did she go there?! *Batchaser propelled himself forward, leaping over brambles and nettle patches until he'd crossed the border near ThunderClan territory. The scream grew quieter, but he located it in the bottom of a hollow. Batchaser slid between fallen tree trunks, adrenaline pumping his body forward. He eventually skidded to a stop where another scream cut off and there-*

there was Lynxbite-

She was three quarters submerged in quicksand, jaws opening into a strangled cry that quickly filled with the bubbling brown substance. Lynxbite looked at him, eyes closing painfully, and then she was gone.

"NO!" Batchaser did what any stupid tom would do and leapt right in after her, paws swishing through the quicksand as he tried to find her sinking body. However, his movements became choppy and eventually Batchaser became stuck as well, thick globs sticking to his fur. He closed his eyes and realized that, if he died now, he would see Lynxbite in StarClan, see Adderpaw and, maybe, his mother. The thought of dying suddenly wasn't so terrifying. Maybe I should let it happen. If I've lost Lynxbite, I've lost everything.

Batchaser would come to realize that the world never seemed to work in his favor, though. A strong set of paws heaved him from the quicksand and propped him on top of a thick log, pulling him to solid ground. "No!" he cried, hardly able to register what was happening. "Lynxbite! LYNXBITE! No...."

After the ThunderClan patrol saved him, Batchaser was escorted back to camp after a wash-up in the nearby river. News of Lynxbite's death spread quickly, and rumors began to circulate- had Batchaser killed his own mate? Was he working with ThunderClan? Why were they out of the territory, and what idiot gets stuck in quicksand?!

The words didn't matter to Batchaser anymore, though. Moons came and went, and his heart became cold, his tongue sharper than ever before. It seemed as if everyone avoided him - and, really, he couldn't blame them for doing so. Batchaser was sure Finchcall's last words to him were very true. Maybe he deserved this. The pain, the suffering, the agony. If not, then why was StarClan so cruel?

Fallenstar and his mate - Sapbranch - eventually had a single kitten they named Spiderkit. Batchaser tried to ignore her, but the huge, shaggy, black-furred imbecile never left him alone. That's why when, one night, watching the stars alone in the clearing, he did something he never thought he'd ever have the courage to do.

The night had been dark, little to no stars speckling the sky. The

moon was shrouded in storm clouds, a light drizzle spitting on the earth. Batchaser's ears flickered when he heard the crunch of twigs and the hushed murmurs of voices. "C'mon. Just follow me out here. It's no worries. I won't hurt you. Your dad sent me."

Batchaser's blood turned cold when he heard Spiderkit respond back, "Okay." What was going on? Senses on high alert, the black tom slunk through the blanket of shadows, creeping through the undergrowth. He saw the outline of Spiderkit, and another tom was leading her away from the border - a ThunderClan *cat, pale brown in color with glowing green eyes. "Fallenstar is over here?"*

"He is." The tom crept up behind Spiderkit, eyes trailing over the she-kit's body. "Just a little further, now."

Batchaser felt like he was going to be sick. "What are you doing, you sick freak?!" he snarled, outraged.

The ThunderClan tom quickly whipped around, eyes wide. "O-oh! I'm- I'm sorry, this kit was lost so I was just telling her I'd take her back to your camp-"

"Batchaser!" Spiderkit exclaimed gleefully, grinning widely. She suddenly narrowed her eyes and stared at the strange tom in confusion. "What? You said Fallenstar was over there!"

The ThunderClan tom opened his jaws to explain, but Batchaser was faster. "I know." His black fur began to bush along his back. "What's your name?"

The cat wavered, paws pointing toward his own territory. "I- I don't- I don't think-"

"What." Batchaser stalked forward with each word. "Is. Your. NAME?"

The ThunderClan tom seemed to deflate, green eyes dimming. "Paleheart." He suddenly jerked up. "I- we- we can share, hey, if you promise not to tell, I don't mind if you come along-"

Batchaser protectively curled his tail around Spiderkit and pressed her close to his side. The words made him want to throw up, and the

thought of some tom trying to do something so vile to this innocent kit.... it made him angry. He pulsed with rage. "I'm going to kill you." Batchaser's words were cold and quiet, but the bite was there. The threat was imminent.

Paleheart stared at him numbly, then his expression morphed into one of assurance. "Then you'd best watch your back, Batchaser.*"*

Three moons later and Rippletail lead the battle attack into ThunderClan's territory. Three moons later and Batchaser would die at the claws of Paleheart, sickening green eyes glowering over his body. Three moons later and Batchaser would find his way to StarClan, except none of his family was there, and he was alone once more, left to be solitary in a place meant to bring family back together....

Batchaser's eyes cracked open. Spiderstar was standing over him, a clear frown on her muzzle, ears flicking back. "Do you remember?"

The black tom shook with a sob and nodded. "I remember it. I... I remember everything."

Batchaser truly wished he hadn't.

A/N: Okay..... this chapter got dark. Like really dark. Paleheart is a piece of trash so go read chapter 4 again and enjoy his torture.....bc I HATE HIM!

Anyway. What'd you guys think? Pretty long chapter - I think the longest I've ever published in this book - so I'm looking forward to hearing your thoughts. Have a safe night, and make sure not to be alone. You're all wonderful and I love you.

Please vote and comment your thoughts, and may StarClan light your path✧

Chapter 41 || Red Snow

By the time Batchaser had calmed down, the sun was already dipping below the skyline, splattering orange and pink streaks across the vast empty space above. The snow had stopped hours ago, but there was still a thin blanket underneath them. The surrounding pine trees rustled with the wind, last remaining leaves fluttering to the ground.

Spiderstar was quiet. Her paws were rooted to the ground, thick black fur bristling with the breeze. Batchaser had propped himself up beside a rock, chest heaving back and forth. His gaze was unfocused, thoughts rolling all over the place. There were so many things he'd forgotten about his death - Paleheart, mainly.

A shadow moved in his peripheral vision and Batchaser flinched, immediately tensing. It was just Spiderstar. She dropped down next to him on her belly, yellow gaze flickering. "So...you remember *everything*?"

He nodded slowly, unsure of whether his voice would be able to come out or not. Batchaser looked at her, but he felt dissociated, like he could hardly control his body. "Yes. Paleheart."

She smiled sadly. "I had to help you remember. I'm sorry."

Batchaser shook his head, thin tail flicking. "It... it's fine." His voice came out low and broken. "I always wondered why...why he killed me."

Spiderstar's lips thinned into a neutral line. "We were furious, you know."

The black tom looked up at her, confused. "About what?"

"Paleheart killing you," she replied. "ShadowClan was. *Especially* me. When... when I told my father about my suspicions, and that night in the forest, he was so angry he drove ThunderClan out. The

prophecy was just an excuse- he wanted them dead, especially Paleheart, and certainly didn't want them near me. I... I only learned later what could've happened to me that night had you not been around."

Batchaser shivered, fur along his spine tingling. He didn't want to think about that night. "What happened after ThunderClan was driven out?" he murmured.

The large black she-cat shifted her paws. "Things were tense. My father....he believed Doestar was going to come back and kill him, and I suppose that paranoia was well-earned."

Batchaser frowned. Doestar was a mystery he hadn't yet been able to solve - what were her motives? *Uniting* the Clans? That seemed like the twisting of words in her own favor. Batchaser also wanted to know what was up with those creepy powers of hers. Seriously. It was weird. "And she killed him."

Spiderstar bristled uncomfortably. "Yes," she said slowly. "I only became deputy before he...." The huge black she-cat shook her head, chest heaving. "ThunderClan destroyed us, Batchaser. I don't know what to do. I don't know how to lead my Clan."

He could see the vulnerabilities cracking, the mask crumbling. Batchaser knew something about that. "You *do* know," the black tom countered. "Fallenstar was your father. He was a smart cat - perhaps infamous, but still smart. I don't doubt your judgement, and I think you know exactly what to do. You're just scared you'll be wrong."

Spiderstar blinked at him. She shook her head slowly. "You're different than I remember."

He frowned. "I guess...I've learned a lot. I've seen a lot. Met new cats, experienced new things. I'm bound to change."

The black she-cat flicked her bushy tail. "Yeah, I suppose you're right-"

The world became a blur of colors and sounds. Batchaser hissed as

pain thrummed in his skull, pressing harshly against his head. His claws unsheathed, tail lashed back and forth. His eyes opened but he couldn't see anything except Silverpelt glimmering against an indigo sky, where stars began to pulse and explode, balls of light showering the earth.

The stars turned into droplets of snow and the dark sky turned white. Batchaser saw a flash of calico fur, red staining the pale ground below. He shivered when a set of fiery blue eyes - one clear, one paled over - matched his own, and by then the headache was becoming unbearable, it felt like his head might explode. Batchaser screamed in pain and tried to pull himself out of the vision, but the forest faded into a meadow, where Jackalstar cried, "He's dead. He's dead!"

No! Batchaser tried to yell, but nothing came out of his jaws. He saw corpses scattered across the fields and the blood began to seep into the earth, staining it red. The sky crackled and opened to reveal a crimson sky falling to the world, crashing into the water. The sky was crumbling. It was falling.

"BATCHASER!"

He gasped deeply, eyes snapping open. Spiderstar was staring at him, a look of horror on her face. Batchaser tried to speak, but his mouth was dry, like he'd licked a pile of sand.

"Batchaser, what-"

"Something terrible is going to happen," he breathed, eyes flashing.

The black she-cat flinched. "What did you see?"

"I-" Batchaser's voice died in the small of his throat and he shook his head, staggering to his paws. "We must go back to camp, warn the Clan, we must gather everyone-"

"*Batchaser*." Spiderstar placed a paw on the tom's shoulder, looking serious. "What did you see?"

Batchaser paused, letting the fear bubble in his chest. "Death," he finally breathed.

Spiderstar stilled momentarily but shook out of her thoughts. "We must get back to camp."

Before either ShadowClan cat could begin to take their first step, however, the snapping of twigs pulled them back toward ThunderClan territory. A dark shape quickly moved through the undergrowth before tumbling out of the bushes, a set of brown and blue eyes gazing back at Batchaser. "They're coming! Run!"

The tom stared at Cypressfall, unable to comprehend her words for a moment. "Wait- what?" His voice became panicked. "*Who's* coming?"

Spiderstar anxiously looked between the two then turned her gaze toward the treeline.

"It doesn't *matter*!" Cypressfall shrieked. It was then that Batchaser saw her matted fur, torn paws, shivering gaze. She was hurt.

We don't have time, Batchaser reminded himself. "Okay, let's go." He turned to run back toward ShadowClan camp, but a shape moved on the edge of the clearing. He whirled around, and there was another group of cats, slowly inching forward.

Horror. *We're surrounded.*

Cypressfall began to shake. "No," she whispered. "No. No. No..."

Spiderstar lashed her tail. "What is the meaning of this?" she demanded.

The ThunderClan cats didn't respond.

"Answer me!" Spiderstar snarled. "You're in ShadowClan territory, so I suggest you leave before things get ugly."

Still no response except dead silence. Then, Batchaser saw a larger shape brush through the foliage, stepping out into the light, horizon splattered against her back. He saw the blue eyes, soft brown fur, a bushy tail.

"Doestar," he whispered.

The ThunderClan leader scrutinized him with a deep frown, silent.

Batchaser recognized Raveneye and Bumbletongue somewhere amongst the crowd of cats - there were at least seven surrounding them, and no matter how much he *wanted* to escape, Batchaser knew it was futile. "What do you want?" he asked shakily when no one spoke. Looking into Doestar's eyes filled him with dread and pulsing nostalgia.

Snow began to flutter to the ground once more as light splayed across the land, shielded by a stark-white sky. Doestar's gaze flickered from Batchaser to Spiderstar. She eventually pointed toward Cypressfall. "That one."

The tortoiseshell pressed herself into Batchaser's side. "No," she whispered. "Don't let them take me."

Doestar's eyes lit up with interest. "Oh. So you know each other?" A sinister smile spread across her muzzle, eyes sparkling with something malicious. "How....disappointing."

Spiderstar shook her head and stepped forward. "I don't know who you think I am, but I will not allow you to disrespect my cats on my territory."

The pale brown leader tipped her head. "The spy is yours?"

Spiderstar's eyes widened. She looked at Cypressfall, then Batchaser, clearly considering her options. "Yes," the black she-cat eventually said, turning back toward Doestar. "So I suggest you leave."

Doestar laughed, claws scoring against the ground. "You're so much like your father. At least, before I killed him."

Spiderstar flinched, but Batchaser could see the hatred writhing beneath her gaze. "Don't talk about Fallenstar."

"Okay," Batchaser cut in, "can we do this peacefully? Doestar,

you're not taking her." He wrapped his tail around Cypressfall. "Now leave."

The pale brown she-cat laughed again, but it was more of a cackle than anything. "Batchaser," she purred. "Since when did I start taking orders from you? Certainly not when we knew each other so long ago...."

What? Batchaser stared at the leader, terribly confused. "I....are you okay? I think your mother dropped you on the head as a kit, because we definitely do not know each other."

Doestar smiled. "But don't we?"

Batchaser frowned, desperately trying to wrack his mind for any semblance of connection. He hadn't met Doestar before he returned to the real world. Right? "I don't know what you're talking about."

The leader waved a paw dismissively, then paused. "Hmm..." She looked between Spiderstar and Batchaser. "You know, I think we could have a real partnership here."

"*What*?" Spiderstar spat, glaring at the other leader. "There will be no *partnership* between us."

"Why not?" she said innocently, placing a paw on her chest. "Just give over the spy and I'll let you go with no hard feelings. ThunderClan could certainly use your..." Doestar made a face. "*Assets*."

"What are you saying?" Spiderstar growled. "An alliance? You must be out of your mind. That will never happen!"

"Oh, come now." She fixed a look on Batchaser. "I'm sure you know of my plans, right?"

Spiderstar's head swiveled to Batchaser. "*What* plans?" she said suspiciously.

The black tom didn't look at her, gaze fixated on Doestar. *Why is there something so familiar about her?* He eventually nodded. "Yes."

"Then you must know that ShadowClan will hardly be of importance." Doestar waved a paw. "I might as well slaughter the lot of you-"

Spiderstar let out a roar of anger and leapt forward, fangs outstretched as she dove for Doestar. The pale brown she-cat quickly sidestepped and flashed out a paw, cuffing Spiderstar's throat with her claws. Batchaser heard the black she-cat's skin tear and staggered back when blood began to pour from her body. Doestar huffed and dropped Spiderstar's lifeless body to the ground, sharpened gaze returning to Batchaser.

Dear StarClan, he thought, and the terror began to sink in. Batchaser curled his tail tighter around Cypressfall. "Don't come any closer," he tried to snarl, but his voice wobbled with fear.

Doestar rolled her eyes. "As I was *saying*," She shot a glare toward Spiderstar's dead body, "it would further benefit me to kill all of you instead of recruit you into my new Clan. However, if you help me with WindClan and RiverClan, I'll be sure to spare all of your lives."

"You just *killed* Spiderstar!" Batchaser cried.

Doestar grunted. "Yes, and she has more than one life, doesn't she? Please don't blame me for Spiderstar's selfishness. She's just like her father."

Batchaser couldn't believe this. He made sure not to look at Spiderstar, not intent on traumatizing himself for the rest of time. "I don't care," he finally spat. "ShadowClan will not be joining your *Clan*, psychopath. Go find someone else to bend to your rule!"

The soft brown she-cat stared at him and sighed, shaking her head, tutting. "How disappointing indeed," she said. Doestar turned her head toward Bramblevine, the annoying tom that had kidnapped Batchaser to ThunderClan camp for the first time. "You want to prove yourself? Show you can follow my orders."

The young tom smirked, teeth showing. "Gladly." Batchaser turned toward him, claws unsheathing. Bramblevine snorted. "Just

give her up, rogue. I can't imagine you'll be living much longer, anyway."

"I'm not a *rogue*," Batchaser spat.

Bramblevine groaned. "This again? Seriously, I thought-"

Something hard knocked into the back of Batchaser's skull, toppling him to the ground. He groaned painfully, suddenly unable to move his body. Hivestripe was standing over him, glare cold and icy, before he ripped Cypressfall away. He saw a thick piece of wood scattered to the ground.

"No," Batchaser groaned deliriously. "Don't.... take her..."

Doestar sighed heavily. "Bramblevine, you *must* learn to shut your mouth. Hivestripe took her before you could even *begin* to prove yourself."

The brown tom shrunk in on himself. "O-okay, sorry, Doestar..."

She looked at Bramblevine, eyes narrowing. "Hmm..." The pale brown she-cat eyed Cypressfall. "All right. I'll give you another chance."

Bramblevine perked up. "Really?" he breathed. "Thank you, Doestar. I won't fail you this time-"

"Kill her."

Batchaser's eyes widened. "NO!" he tried to yell, but his voice was too hoarse to hear.

Bramblevine stilled. He looked at Cypressfall, eyes widening. "U-uhm," he stammered. "Kill....kill the *spy*?"

"Of course," Doestar said, like it was obvious. "Kill her and I'll make sure you become head fighter in LakeClan."

The brown tom bristled slightly, but Batchaser couldn't tell if it was from nerves or excitement. "I..." Bramblevine shuffled his paws anxiously. "I don't know...maybe she has valuable information..?"

Doestar glared at the warrior. "Do you think I'm stupid?" she spat, voice changing. "Of course she has valuable information. That's why she must be killed."

"Wait-" Cypressfall wriggled in Hivestripe's grasp, eyes flashing with some sort of recognition. "Wait, k-kill me? No! No! I can't- I can't go back!"

Batchaser forced himself to shift slightly, muscles burning with the movement. "No," he groaned, shakily placing his paws into the ground and trying to stand. A shape flashed in his vision and a paw slammed his head into the ground, body immobilized by a heavier weight.

"This is for attacking me in the forest," Bumbletongue growled, craning his head toward Doestar.

Thymeclaw frowned at his son but stayed silent.

"No!" Batchaser said, trying to move once more. Bumbletongue grunted and lifted his weight slightly, then a painful smack came to the back of his head. Batchaser screamed angrily, pain lacing his entire being. It felt like he was going to die. His vision flashed in and out, stars swirling in his gaze. The world became a blur once more, ears ringing, before everything faded back into reality.

"I don't..." Bramblevine was backing away from Cypressfall, who was desperately clawing for freedom from Hivestripe. She was too weak. "I....please... don't make me do this!"

Doestar scowled. "You want to prove yourself yet you can't even follow my orders?" The snow began to build up around the clearing, grass covered by the white substance. "You're not proving yourself here, Bramblevine."

The brown tom flinched, ears flicking back. "I-" His jaw clenched and he narrowed his eyes. "You know what?" Bramblevine stomped up to Doestar, stopping before her. "I don't want to be a part of your stupid Clan anyway! LakeClan? More like *LameClan*! Who do you think you are, taking over all the territories? Killing cats? You're just a stupid she-cat who can't even-"

Doestar flicked her head forward and sunk her jaws into Bramblevine's skin, ripping his throat out. The air left Batchaser's chest as he watched with horror. Doestar stepped back and smiled when Bramblevine wheezed out several labored breaths and limply fell into the snow, fur coated in a thick sheet of blood.

Doestar looked down at the dying warrior, turning her gaze to Hivestripe. She nodded.

Hivestripe swiped his claws across Cypressfall's throat.

"NO!" Batchaser screamed.

The calico she-cat's eyes wavered and she gasped in for air, claws trying to hold on to something. Cypressfall fell into the snow, harshly convulsing with each inhale. "R-Ru-shi-shing-" Her voice faded out of existence and she stopped shaking, going completely limp.

"NO!" Batchaser yelled again, heart hammering against his chest. He tried to force the tears out of his eyes but they burned behind his eyelids, forcing themselves down his cheeks. He was trembling, terrified, cold, and traumatized. Batchaser's head was filled with blood, bubbling up against his will. "No," he cried brokenly, unable to fight any longer.

Hivestripe retreated into the crowd and Doestar sidestepped the two dead cats. "Awww," she said silkily. "Is someone *sad*?" She shoved her muzzle in Batchaser's face, smirking. "I can't imagine why...."

Something horrible burned in Batchaser's soul. Something he thought he'd known before, but now it was *real*. Hatred. He *hated* Doestar. He wanted to kill her. Batchaser stayed silent for a moment, unmoving, but when Doestar was close enough, snapped his paw forward unexpectedly. His claws split her skin open as he raked them over her face, feeling her eye squelch under his weight.

"AGGHH!" Doestar screamed, staggering back. She waved her head around wildly, lifting her shaking paws to her eye. "IT BURNS!" Blood dripped down her face, staining the snow red.

Batchaser watched, satisfied, puffing out a breath when Bumbletongue hopped off of him, rushing to his leader.

Thymeclaw ran forward as well, absolutely petrified. "D-Doestar!" he stammered, shrinking back when she tried to strike him. "I- it's me! Thymeclaw!"

"KILL HIM!" she shrieked, body shaking. "KILL THAT ROGUE!" Before anyone could move, Doestar stumbled to her paws and found her way toward Batchaser. Under the crimson fur, he could make out three clawmarks marring her skin. She struck forward in a blind rage, teeth sinking into his ear.

Batchaser felt white, hot pain and began to sob. His vision darkened, flashing in and out of consciousness, and when he was able to see slightly clearly, Doestar was gripping his right ear between her teeth. Batchaser screamed, terror clenching him in its jaws, and grew hysterical when he felt the blood dripping down his fur. "NO! NO, NO-" It hurt so badly, so, so badly, and Batchaser suddenly wasn't sure he was going to make it, wasn't going to live to save the Clans, to see Jackalstar ever again....

Doestar was glaring at him in disgust. "You can die here," she spat. "You'll die alone, in the cold, just like you've always deserved."

Batchaser couldn't respond. He wasn't sure he was alive anymore, or even conscious, all he knew was that everything was muffled and laced with the most horrid pain of his entire life.

In the blurriness, he saw Hivestripe grab Spiderstar by the scruff and drag her into the undergrowth, the snow flattening under her weight. Batchaser saw the rest of the cats disappear into the foliage, but hardly cared. His vision was overrun by white, and when he closed his eyes, Batchaser saw the vision. Calico fur stained with red. Fiery blue eyes - one clear, one pale - staring back at him.

It had come true. Everything was true.

Batchaser sobbed, heart cracking in his chest. He saw Cypressfall lying limp in the snow, a pool of red surrounding her body. He squeezed his eyes shut, reopened them, and dragged himself over to

her. They'd been through so much together, and now she was dead, limp and completely lifeless. It hurt. It truly did.

I've never witnessed a murder, Batchaser thought, and he wondered if he'd ever be the same after this. Somehow, he doubted it. *Yes, because I'll be dead*. Batchaser began to cry once more, pulling his body next to hers, brushing her fur. He curled by Cypressfall, letting her last bit of warmth seep into his pelt. Maybe dying wouldn't be so bad. He'd be free of the pain, the guilt, the heartbreak. The deaths of his loved ones, his friends.

It's me. I'm the problem.

The snow built more and more and the cold oddly began to warm his body. He shifted slightly but cried out when there was more pain. Batchaser didn't dare touch his head, terrified of what he'd feel, but wiped blood from his forehead. He saw the crimson smear against his pawpad. His vision began to fade away, an inky darkness taking over, and before Batchaser knew it, the world was gone forever.

A/N: Wow, okay, this chapter was going to actually come around....chapter 50? Well, it's here early! This was really fun and exciting to write, but of course, sad...

Anyway, things in this story are FINALLY moving along. What do you think Doestar's plan is? How the heck is Batchaser gonna get out of this?! Many questions indeed~

Thanks for all your support and I hope you enjoy. I love all of you. Please vote and comment your thoughts, and may StarClan light your path!✧

Chapter 42 || Snowfall

[image]

Batchaser could feel himself fading in and out of consciousness. His eyelids crackled open every few moments, but his strength would dissipate and he would fall back into a warm, black world. He didn't know where he was, what was happening, how long he'd been out...it felt like his head had been stuffed with cotton and he couldn't *think*, could only feel.

When he was finally able to completely open his eyes, Batchaser found he was tucked in the back of a brown cave. Outside, showers of white snow formed a foggy curtain he could hardly see through. Batchaser could vaguely hear a stream somewhere far away, and with his senses returning, so did the memories.

Batchaser completely crumpled. His breathing stopped and his paws began to shake, horrors flashing behind his eyelids. *Doestar, Spiderstar, Cypressfall, Bramblevine, Hivestripe.....* Batchaser's whole body began to ache and then he remembered what he'd done to Doestar, and what she'd done to him in turn.

He absolutely didn't want to, but knew he needed to feel the top of his head and figure out how injured he was. Batchaser screwed his eyes shut, heart beating rapidly, and lifted a shaking paw to the top of his head. He felt for where his right ear should've been, except it was empty air. Batchaser felt his breath stop and he patted his paw to the area and felt the scar curling over his fur, closing up the hole where his ear had been.

"Oh, StarClan," he whispered, and tears involuntarily leaked out of his eyes. Batchaser couldn't breathe, it felt like he was dying, his heart began to beat faster and faster until he started to wheeze, crying hopelessly. "No, no, no, no...." Cypressfall was dead and now he was scarred for the rest of time, physically and emotionally.

And now he was alone.

Batchaser had never minded solitude, but this was something else. He was in a cave he didn't recognize, snow building up outside, injured, freezing, and completely, utterly alone. If he died, no one would be here to see him off. No one would even *know*.

"You deserve to die alone!" Cedartuft spat, whirling around to face Batpaw. "And you're going to, because even StarClan can see how pathetic you are."

Batchaser began to cry hysterically. His vision was blurred by tears and he grasped at his chest, trying to breathe but completely unable to. His father had been right. He was next, just like Cypressfall. He hadn't even been able to protect her.

"I'm sorry," he sobbed, face contorted into a look of pure agony. Batchaser wasn't sure he wanted to move now. Wasn't sure he wanted to get up, stand, do anything. He deserved to die. He'd let Cypressfall and Spiderstar die. He hadn't even been able to save his own mate, his *kits*...

Sudden movement at the mouth of the den caused Batchaser to stiffen. His fur bristled slightly but he was too weak to move, hardly able to even shift his paws. His throat was dry, voice rough and grating. "Who- who's there?"

A shape moved through the snow. Batchaser tried to move, but the hot, flashing pain completely immobilized him. *Doestar. It's her. She's come back to kill me or torture* me. He began to shake his head and closed his eyes, terrified. "No, no, no," he whispered. "Please don't."

"Batchaser."

He stopped. The voice caught him off guard. It was a tom, for one, but not one he recognized well. Additionally, the voice was low and muffled, but Batchaser realized it was because of his new injury. The black tom's breath rattled in his chest and he forced his eyes to open, staring back at a brown tom, deep green gaze checking over his wound.

Batchaser narrowed his eyes, confused. "Thymeclaw?" he

croaked. Somewhere deep in his mind registered the memory of the ThunderClan deputy allowing he and Rushingpaw to pass without a word. *He's good...I think....* "What are you doing here?"

Thymeclaw frowned, shuffling his paws anxiously. Batchaser watched as the brown tom dropped a bundle of herbs. "I...I couldn't leave you there to die..." He trailed off.

Something worked harshly in Batchaser's gut. He wanted to cry, wanted to scream, wanted to yell...but he couldn't. "And Cypressfall?" His voice came out as a raspy whimper.

Thymeclaw stared at him in sympathy. Batchaser hated it. "I buried her near the hill."

He closed his eyes, forcing himself to keep the tears *in* this time. The kindness was horribly overwhelming. "Thank you," he croaked.

There was no response. When Batchaser reopened his eyes, Thymeclaw was pushing the herbs toward him. "Dawnsky helped me patch up your....well." When Batchaser said nothing, Thymeclaw's tail anxiously twitched back and forth. "The herbs- it's nothing bad. Chervil, feverfew, chickweed..."

Batchaser narrowed his eyes. "Chickweed? Don't you...need that for ThunderClan?"

Thymeclaw sighed. "Yes, but Dawnsky insisted. When we found you, you had a severe case of Greencough, half-dead in the snow...you're lucky to be alive."

The black tom scoffed. "Yeah. *Lucky*."

"You are. Not many cats survive leaf-bare, especially after catching Greencough."

Unlike my father. Batchaser's heart constricted and he sighed, lapping up the foul-tasting herbs in a matter of seconds. "No food?"

"Sorry." Thymeclaw sat down and began to wash his pelt, bushy tail wrapping around his feet. It was freezing outside. "You ate yesterday, that's the best I could do for now."

Batchaser muttered something unintelligible and grunted, laying his chin on his paws. The pain was starting to throb away, slowly but surely. Questions buzzed on the outer edges of his mind. What was happening? Where was Spiderstar? Was Doestar enacting her plan to unite the Clans? Was Jackalstar safe?

He could only start with one at a time, though. "So..." Batchaser frowned. "What happened...after..." His voice died. He couldn't say it.

Thankfully, Thymeclaw understood what he was trying to say. "We returned to camp and left Spiderstar to be guarded by our senior warriors," he said gravely. "After, we.....we ambushed WindClan."

Batchaser stilled. WindClan. *Jackalstar is in WindClan.* "A-and... what happened?" he prompted.

Thymeclaw looked away. "Half of them ran, half stayed, a few were killed..."

The black tom's breath caught in his throat. *Please, let Jackalstar be safe*. "Who- who was killed?"

The deputy just shook his head. "I don't know, I didn't stay for the entirety of the siege. Doestar wanted me to take a patrol back to camp and check up on the elders, senior warriors, and Spiderstar. She still wasn't awake. That's when Dawnsky talked to me and said....said she couldn't bear to leave you and Cypressfall out, alone, *especially* not leave you to die. We found the clearing and your heart was hardly beating. I buried Cypressfall while Dawnsky tended to your... wound..." Thymeclaw trailed off.

Batchaser shook his head. "I'm....confused," he said. Was Thymeclaw playing both sides? Why had he saved Batchaser and buried Cypressfall? Did he approve of what Doestar was doing? "Why are you telling me all of this?"

The brown tom stopped between licks, ears twitching. "Because I...I want this to stop."

Batchaser stared at the ThunderClan deputy, silently willing him to continue.

"Sunpaw told me," Thymeclaw anxiously went on.

Batchaser's eyes widened. "About- about *me*?"

"Yes." He looked up and met Batchaser's gaze.

"And you believed her?"

"Of course I did." Thymeclaw narrowed his eyes. "She's my daughter, and I know she's never held faith in StarClan before..."

"Wait, Sunpaw is *your* daughter? I didn't know that." Batchaser shook his head. This was getting more and more confusing.

"Yes. She was in my second litter, a while after Bumbletongue...." Thymeclaw trailed off. "I wanted to stop Doestar, Batchaser. I did. But....I'm trying to keep my family safe."

"So am I," Batchaser growled, muscles aching as he slowly lifted himself to his paws. "But the difference between us is I've already died. *Twice*. I know what's going to happen if Doestar succeeds in 'uniting' all of the Clans."

Thymeclaw stared at him, wide-eyed. "Wh-what.... will happen?"

"StarClan will fade from existence."

The brown tom sunk his claws into the damp soil, terrified. "No," he whispered. "They can't. They can't leave us."

Batchaser flicked his tail, looking pained. "I know. I'm trying to stop this, Thymeclaw, but I need more help. I need *you*."

Thymeclaw looked at him like he'd grown a second head. "*Me*? What could I possibly do?"

"You're ThunderClan's deputy!" Batchaser exclaimed. Was this cat stupid? "Don't you understand? You can tell me what's going on. You can help me- can help *us*- win StarClan back."

The brown tom was shaking his head. "No, no, no....I....I.. I can't, I can't put my family in danger, if I do this-"

"You're putting your family in danger by *not* doing anything!" Batchaser snapped. Pain writhed in his chest and his breath came out as a rattled wheeze. He dropped to the ground, darkness flicking at the sides of his vision.

"Oh, no," Thymeclaw said, rushing forward. "Are you okay? I'm sorry, it was my fault, my fault...."

Batchaser's head spun for a moment. He flinched back from Thymeclaw's touch, seeing the look of pain in the other tom's eyes. "I'm fine," he managed, voice softening. How did he go about this? "Thymeclaw....listen to me.. you're a good cat. You helped me when you didn't have to. You buried a cat you didn't even know. There's something inside of you that wants to fight back, I can see it. Don't you want to keep your family safe? Doestar's Clan- this *LakeClan*- will do no such thing. This war will only put them in danger. Thymeclaw." Batchaser closed his eyes, thought about Jackalstar, and reopened them. "Do the right thing. You've saved my life, and I'm eternally grateful for that. Now you need to save other lives."

Thymeclaw was staring at him. He looked away momentarily, clearly contemplating his options. "What do I do?" he finally croaked out.

Batchaser forced back a relieved breath. "You just tell me what's going on in ThunderClan, okay? It's simple."

The brown tom nodded slowly. "Okay, I- I can do that..."

"Good. Can you tell me what's going on now? What's her next course of action?"

Thymeclaw frowned. "I...I don't know, like I said, I haven't returned yet...in fact if I don't return to camp soon my patrol will get suspicious."

Batchaser shook his head. "Are you already going back to WindClan?"

"Yes, Doestar...." He frowned. "She wants Spiderstar and the senior warriors to come back with me..."

"What about the apprentices? The queens? The kits, the elders?"

"The apprentices are in the battlefield," Thymeclaw said, tail nervously flicking back and forth. "I....she... she said to leave the rest there... take only the senior warriors.."

"StarClan," Batchaser whispered, thinking hard. Okay. Maybe he could get to ShadowClan - *they're probably freaking out as we speak* - and convince them to come with him to ThunderClan, keep the rest of the cats left behind safe... "Where is Doestar planning to hit next?"

"RiverClan," Thymeclaw said grimly.

Rushingpaw, Pearlsnap, Applestar, Timberfall, Beetlepaw.... Batchaser couldn't let that happen. Besides, Applestar only had one life left. "When?"

"She wanted to let the warriors heal before we strike...so not for a couple of days at least.."

Okay, a few days is better than one. Still, I wish I could spare more time. Batchaser sighed heavily. "How long have I been out? I need to get back to ShadowClan, who knows what's going on over there.."

Thymeclaw shuffled his paws. "A few days at least, maybe four...this is the first time you've really woken up, I can't imagine you'll be able to walk far."

Batchaser shook his head. "Okay, that's fine, I can get to ShadowClan, you need to return to ThunderClan and-"

"Wait, by yourself?" Thymeclaw shook his head, green eyes widening. "No, I can't let you do that, you'll die!"

"More cats will die if I don't try!" Batchaser snapped back, fire lapping in his chest. Thymeclaw shrunk back. "Leave the heavy thinking to me. I'm fine, I'm awake, I'm not going to die. How far out are we?"

Thymeclaw looked at him and eventually sighed. He wasn't going to change Batchaser's mind. "Only a few tree-lengths, you should be back to ShadowClan by... well, not long."

"Splendid." The black tom forced his aching joints to move and heaved himself up beside the wall, trying to keep his footing. "Let's go."

"Batchaser..." Thymeclaw frowned and looked outside. "A bad snowstorm rolled in the night we took you to this cave. I'm afraid you're not going to make it!"

"Didn't I say to leave that up to me?" Batchaser could hardly see, vision flashing with multicolored spots. Thymeclaw didn't need to know that, though. "I'm fine. Get back to ThunderClan and make sure you know what Doestar's next course of action is. If you can, meet me on the outer edges of RiverClan territory in two days at moonhigh."

Thymeclaw blinked at him and physically deflated. "Okay," he muttered, slowly turning away and facing the curtain of snow outside. Batchaser hobbled up beside him, pain flashing angrily in his ear — or lack thereof. He quickly hid it, shoulder muscles rippling with each step. "I....I guess this is goodbye, for now."

"Don't worry," Batchaser said, looking at the ThunderClan deputy. "You're going to be fine, as is your family. Okay?"

Thymeclaw nodded gratefully. "Thank you, Batchaser....if...if you're really able to stop Doestar, my life will be in your debt."

"Consider it paid for saving me and burying—" The black tom's voice died. "Burying my friend."

Thymeclaw didn't respond. "I'll see you in two nights." He flicked his bushy tail and stepped out into the cold, pushing through the thick mounds of snow until the fog building up around the forest covered him completely.

Batchaser squinted through the haze but saw no sign of Thymeclaw anywhere. *Looks like it's just me*. He breathed in harshly.

Show time. The black tom walked out into the snow, cold immediately bowling over his entire body. Batchaser cried out in pain as it stung his eyes, thin fur fluffing out to try and warm himself slightly. The snowstorm was relentless, spirals of wind pushing hard on his body. *And I have to go against the wind. StarClan.*

He began his trek through the snow, taking Thymeclaw's directions and trying to recognize any sort of ShadowClan scent or marking. Batchaser had no idea where he was — everything was white, pounding against the ground, and all he could see were the tees towering around him.

There. Nature began to clump together, oak trees thinning into pines. He was in ShadowClan. The webs of branches above stopped some of the snow from falling, but the wind was still unbroken, clawing at Batchaser's face. He turned his head away and clamped his eyes shut, trying not to let the snow get in his eyes. *Come on. You're close. You have to be*.

The thing that set Batchaser on edge was the silence of the forest. He knew it was because of the snow, as he'd seen it before, but with the loss of an ear brought only half of that limited hearing in the current weather. *If someone sneaks up on me, I'll be dead before I realize what happened.* Shivering, Batchaser tried not to think too hard on that and continued on, shoving his paws through the snow like it was sludge.

Movement in his peripheral vision caused Batchaser to freeze. His blue eyes widened and he sunk his claws into the dirt, grounding himself. Doestar. *It's her. She's back, she's come to kill me!* But that was impossible. She was out fighting a war in WindClan, preparing for a siege on RiverClan....Shaking his head, Batchaser curled his tail in on himself. "Come out."

A white pelt slid out of the undergrowth. Yellow eyes stared back, wide and shocked and pained. "Batchaser," Cloudflame whispered brokenly.

"Hi," he said, voice wrenching from his throat.

"StarClan." She rushed up to him, scrutinizing his scar. "What- what happened? You were gone for days, Spiderstar disappeared, I thought you were going to talk to me but-" Cloudflame shook her head. "I came back to camp and there was no sign of either of you. But seriously, Batchaser, your ear- I- you shouldn't even be able to *walk*."

"You should see the other cat," he muttered, leaning on the medicine cat for support.

Usually, Cloudflame would've swatted his ear, but....well. Y'know. "This isn't the time for jokes. Let's get to camp and you can tell me everything."

They reached it quickly, bramble walls blocking out the torrents of snow building in the forest outside. Heads turned and voices cried out. Batchaser ducked his head and tried to stay as small as possible. He hated this — hated the sympathy, the concern. *I killed my friend. Because of me, she's dead. Because of me, an innocent — annoying, maybe, but innocent — young warrior is dead. And now look what I've done to myself. I'm basically crippled, Doestar is starting her war....it's over.* The hope had drained and Batchaser was sure he'd never feel right again.

Cloudflame rushed him inside the medicine den and Gorsebrush's head snapped up, eyes widening. "Dear StarClan, what happened?"

Batchaser grunted.

The medicine cat set him down in a warm nest, quickly checking him over for any other wounds. She turned and rolled two poppy seeds toward him. "Eat. You need to rest while I properly treat your ear. StarClan..." She scowled and leaned forward, eyes narrowing as she observed the wound on his head. "Whoever did this is an amateur at best, it couldn't have been you though...you're too dumb to know and you wouldn't be able to reach it anyway."

Batchaser bristled. "Dawnsky helped me," he growled.

Cloudflame stilled, looking at him. "*Dawnsky*?" she said.

"Dawnsky, as in the *ThunderClan* medicine cat?"

Gorsebrush silently watched, glancing between the two.

"Yes." Batchaser's voice dropped due to his exhaustion. He felt starved and weak, like he'd been run over by a car several times.

"Then if Dawnsky helped you, that means you were in ThunderClan. So why don't you start talking and tell me what happened and where my leader is," Cloudflame snarled.

"Don't be dramatic." Batchaser wrenched himself out of the medicine cat's grasp, heart straining. His expression crumpled and the anger was gone, replaced by grief and shame. "I....I talked to Spiderstar and learned some stuff. But my friend who'd been spying on ThunderClan-"

"You didn't tell me this before?" Cloudflame snapped.

"Cloudflame," Gorsebrush said softly, garnering both cats' attention. "Let him speak."

The medicine cat's bristling fur flattened slightly, but she was still on guard. "Fine. Go on."

Batchaser frowned deeply. "As I was *saying*, my friend- you know, the one from *StarClan*- had been spying on ThunderClan, trying to distract them while we came up with a plan."

Cloudflame raised a brow.

He sighed impatiently. "Me, Jackalstar, Rushingpaw, Cypr- Cypressfall, Galewhisker, and Shellstar. Anyway, Cypressfall was supposed to meet up with me a few days ago and I got caught up with Spiderstar. She still found us but told us to run." His brows furrowed. "ThunderClan was coming. They'd seen her, I think, hurt her...she was terrified. I don't know what happened, but before we could run they were surrounding us, we couldn't leave..." He trailed off.

"Go on," Gorsebrush prompted gently.

Batchaser shivered. "Doestar wanted Cypressfall. I said no. Spiderstar was angry and-" He closed his eyes and saw the horrors behind there. "Doestar took one of her lives."

Cloudflame bitterly shook her head. "And?"

"*And*," he snapped, glaring at the medicine cat, "she killed one of her warriors, k-" It hurt to say. Truly. "Killed my friend, and took Spiderstar. I got angry. I- I lashed out, I blinded Doestar, so she decided to take my ear. If I could go back and do it again I would, even knowing what would happen."

The den was silent after that.

Gorsebrush shifted forward and laid his tail on Batchaser's flank. He flinched from the touch. "You did what you had to do. I'm truly sorry for your loss, and sorry for Spiderstar...."

"This still doesn't explain how you're alive," Cloudflame grunted, placing a poultice on his ear wound. "Why did Dawnsky help you? She doesn't even know who you are."

"Because Thymeclaw saw everything. He didn't want me to die, so...he got her to help me. Buried C-Cypressfall."

She raised a brow. "The ThunderClan deputy? Wow, you have friends everywhere..."

Batchaser jerked away from Cloudflame's grasp. "Why are you being such a fox-heart?" he snarled. "I have done nothing wrong and yet you treat me like dirt for absolutely no reason. Why does any of this matter, anyway? I know Doestar's plan, she's already taken over WindClan, RiverClan is next-"

"WindClan was attacked?" Gorsebrush whispered, horrified.

Cloudflame actually looked like she felt guilty. "Look, you need to rest." Her tone became softer. "We can talk about all of these plans later."

Batchaser quickly shook his head. "There's no time. I have to meet Thymeclaw in two days and we need to talk to Applestar

before then and come up with a plan. WindClan is taken. Doestar is on the move, and before long...." He turned away. "The Clans will be united as one."

"United as *one*?" Cloudflame echoed, outraged. "That's impossible. StarClan won't let this happen."

"They can't do anything!" Batchaser exploded, fur bristling. Cloudflame flinched back. "We're the only ones that can control what happens. We have to stop Doestar so the threat of LakeClan doesn't turn into something unstoppable. Will you help me or not?"

Gorsebrush was silent for a moment but eventually nodded, standing on wobbling paws. "I may be old, but I can help. You're right. We must help RiverClan."

Cloudflame sighed, clearly stressed. "We don't have *nearly* enough warriors to stop Doestar. If WindClan is already taken over, we might as well be too."

Batchaser shook his head. "Thymeclaw said some WindClan cats ran to RiverClan, we may still have time. But we have to hurry."

Cloudflame narrowed her eyes. "And you trust Thymeclaw?"

"No question," he said. "First, we need a patrol to get to ThunderClan and help the elders, queens, and kits Doestar left behind to die. We can take them with us and head to RiverClan tomorrow."

The white she-cat looked like she was going to say something, but clamped her jaws shut. "Fine. Gorsebrush, can you organize a patrol?"

"Of course." The old tom nodded and exited the den, voice ringing across the camp.

Cloudflame's ears twitched and she looked at Batchaser. "You think we can do this?"

He looked away. "I don't know. I hope so, Cloudflame."

She sighed and moved past him, tail resting on his shoulder for a moment. "I'm sorry about your friend," the medicine cat murmured. "Rest. We can take care of everything for now." She exited the den and ducked into the flurry of snow, fur blowing back from the wind.

Batchaser watched her go, claws sheathing and unsheathing as he scored the cave ground. *We have to be able to do this. If we don't....*

He craned his head to the roof of the den, imagining Silverpelt spreading across the navy sky. *Then StarClan is already lost.*

A/N: Pretty quick update you guys! This is one of my longer chapters, despite being filler it's still important and I'm really excited for the upcoming chapters. A lot is going to be happening, some plot twists, battles, negotiation, cliffhangers.... I can't wait for you guys to see this story finally unfold with me.

Anywho, what'd y'all think of this chapter? Are the rest of the gang okay? Is Batchaser going to be able to stop Doestar? You'll seeee~! I'd love to hear your theories though.

Thanks so much for reading. Please vote and comment your thoughts, and may StarClan light your path!

Chapter 43 || Unhinged

The snow was relentless. It flung down on the earth and stuck in clumps, piling across the base of ShadowClan's camp like a blanket. The sky was shrouded in pale gray clouds, a surge of blue sporting the horizon that hinted at rain to come.

Batchaser hadn't been able to sleep. The pain in his ear was horrid- flashes of sweats and chills wracked his body, making it nearly impossible to help with anything around camp. Batchaser had planned to head to ThunderClan with the patrol, but Cloudflame forced him to stay back. "It'll get worse before it gets better," she'd told him. Apparently that meant the infection would clear soon, but Batchaser didn't have high hopes.

Additionally, his mind was filled with thoughts of Jackalstar. Was she okay? Was she hurt? He would've tried to call out to her in a dream, but Batchaser was unable to sleep. *Please tell me nothing has happened to her*. His claws dug into the ground every time he had an image of Doestar ripping Jackalstar's throat out. That couldn't happen. He wouldn't let it.

Unless it already has.

Shaking his head, Batchaser thought back to the night before. The ShadowClan patrol had made it to ThunderClan and returned with the cats left behind- two queens, three kits, and one elder. Gorsebrush helped them settle into the elders' den and informed them of the plan.

The plan was Batchaser's, but he wasn't sure RiverClan and ShadowClan had enough to fight against ThunderClan and WindClan. *I need to talk to Applestar. He'll know what to do.* At least, Batchaser hoped. If not, he could plan with Pearlsnap, sometimes she was more relentless when it came to battle than her leader was.

Batchaser was looking forward to seeing Timberfall, Rushingpaw, and Beetlepaw though. So despite the unruly

circumstances, he was excited to be able to see his friends. *And hopefully we all live through this*. Batchaser closed his eyes. Tonight he was going to meet with Thymeclaw on the border, and by tomorrow battle would most likely start. *Will I even be able to fight?* The thought had plagued him and Batchaser wasn't sure. His fever wasn't going away just yet and he wasn't sure he could face Doestar. Every time he closed his eyes he saw her eyes, saw the blood splattering across her muzzle. He couldn't let go of the image, it was constantly battling against his mind. Sometimes he forgot where he was, thought this was some dream and he was still in that clearing, laying injured and bleeding with Cypressfall dead on his side.

Batchaser wasn't sure how to tell Rushingpaw. *Do I even tell him at all?* He'd have to ask Gorsebrush, he was much more skilled in compassion than Batchaser was. He just didn't want to see the apprentice hurt, didn't want to see him cry. Batchaser was sure he'd cry, too.

"Batchaser?"

The black tom's tail flicked and he quietly lifted his head, blinking through the shadows and spotting Cloudflame. The white she-cat moved into the medicine den and touched his shoulder. "Are you feeling better?" she asked.

Batchaser grunted, struggling to his paws, head swimming with the motion. Cloudflame pushed him back to the ground. "C'mon, let me up," he slurred.

The medicine cat frowned. "Maybe you should stay behind with Gorsebrush and the ThunderClan cats, I don't think it's safe for you to go."

Batchaser scowled. "*Safe*? It isn't safe anywhere. I'm going, you can't stop me." He shrugged her off and stumbled to his feet, clinging to the walls of the den to steady himself. "We have to stop Doestar."

"Batchaser..." Cloudflame's voice dropped. "Are you sure you're not doing this out of revenge? I still don't trust Thymeclaw..."

He turned to face her, malice in his eyes. "You don't know anything," Batchaser spat, tail flinging back and forth angrily. "Did you see your friend get killed? No, I don't think so."

"That's my point, you're not in the right frame of mind to be leading a battle," Cloudflame gently reminded him.

Batchaser hated the pity, it made his skin crawl. *I don't deserve sympathy*. He deserved sneers, hate-filled eyes, bared lips and claws. He'd killed his friend, why couldn't anyone see that? The hurt swarmed in the black tom's chest and he turned away from the medicine cat. "It doesn't matter, I'm fine, we need to stop Doestar and get Spiderstar back." He almost wished Cloudflame would go back to snapping at him. She didn't respond and he growled. "Don't you want to save your leader?"

"I do, but I just don't know if this is the way to go about it," Cloudflame murmured.

Batchaser laughed, but it was spiteful and bitter. "There's no other way. Why do you care so much anyway? Huh? Just blame me or something and get it over with!"

Cloudflame took a step back and shook her head. "Batchaser, you're becoming unhinged! What if you hurt yourself? What if another one of your friends gets hurt because of this?"

His chest constricted. He thought about Jackalstar, Rushingpaw, and Galewhisker. "They won't get hurt." His voice wobbled. "I won't let them. I'll die before that happens again!"

"Batchaser..." She stepped forward and touched his flank.

He flinched back as if he'd been burned. "Don't touch me!" he screamed. Cloudflame's eyes filled with sadness. "You hate me, don't you? You want me to die." He shook his head. "I knew it. You never even wanted me here!"

"StarClan, no!" she said, horrified. "I don't want you to *die*, I just want you to be okay!"

The guilt and shame was piling in his stomach. It felt like rocks

were weighing him down, fire lapping in his chest. "Admit it! ShadowClan hates me, everyone does, I'm useless and all I do is kill everyone I'm close to. Admit it." His voice became more broken. "*Admit it*!"

Cloudflame stared at him, mouth opening and closing dumbly. "You.....you're beyond help." She turned and exited the den without another word.

Emotion clawed in Batchaser's throat and he screamed, flinging his paws wildly without even thinking. A sob spluttered from his lips and he pressed his paws to his eyes, curling up in a ball and wishing to escape the truth he'd just heard. *I'm beyond saving. Beyond love, beyond trust....she's right. I'm broken.*

Still, the revelation hurt.

Batchaser shook his head desperately, willing the memories to go away, to fade behind his eyelids. But they never would. When he looked down, he saw blood pooling at his feet, staining his paws. Batchaser yelped and jerked back, caught off guard, vision flashing between reality and the past. A part of him didn't even know where he was — he could still feel the chill of the earth as the snow pelted down, wrapping its cold embrace around his body. And Cypressfall...

Another sob left his mouth. Emotion built up in the back of his throat and he nearly lost it right then and there. She was dead. Because of *him*. Batchaser wasn't sure he'd ever be able to forgive himself- wasn't sure he could continue living with the pain of his family, his friends, the knowledge that he was the reason for everything bad that happened.

It didn't end there, though. He'd not only killed Cypressfall, but pushed Doestar far enough that she ripped his ear off. Another cry at the memories; the blood rushing down his head, his heartbeat pounding in his ears. Batchaser's paws began to shake and he felt the walls of the den begin to enclose around him. Panic beat in his chest and he looked around wildly. "No, no, no," he said over and over again, claws digging into the soft ground underneath. Tears forced their way out of Batchaser's eyes and he wiped them away

frantically, ear flicking back, but that almost made the pain worse.

Dear StarClan, he couldn't be in here anymore. Batchaser shook his head and made his way out of the den, staggering because of the harsh light of the world. Snow fell on his pelt and Batchaser froze, eyes widening at the touch. Once more he was whirled back into the nights before, and he saw Cypressfall, Doestar, Thymeclaw, Spiderstar, Bramblevine, Hivestripe....

"Oh, stars, no," he moaned brokenly, keeping to the edges of camp. He didn't see the stares- the concerned looks, the wide eyes, the exchange of glances between the ShadowClan cats. Even if he had, Batchaser wasn't sure he could find it in himself to care. He needed to get out of camp. He needed to- needed- needed to get away!

Something touched his shoulder and Batchaser held back the scream in his throat. He swiveled his head to Asterpaw, who stared at him with wide eyes. "Bat-Batchaser?" she stuttered. "Are you okay?"

If he wasn't so disoriented, Batchaser would've laughed. No. He was not okay. He was far from it. Despite his thoughts, the black tom nodded, trying to force a weak smile. "Fine. I'm fine."

Apparently others didn't think so, because Cloudflame approached him, bristling. "What in StarClan's name do you think you're doing? Get back in the den!"

If there was one thing Batchaser hated, it was being ordered around. Especially by Cloudflame. "No," he spat, teeth showing. "I'm going to RiverClan. You can't stop me!"

Her tail lashed. "I cannot permit that. If anything you'll mess things up further, you are in no state of mind to make decisions that will affect the entire Clan. Come on. I'll take you back."

Batchaser jerked away before he could be touched. Anger lapped in his belly. "Get away from me," he snarled, voice low. "You don't care about me. I know you blame me for Spiderstar. That's why I'm going to fix this."

Cloudflame narrowed her eyes. "I don't blame you for anything. This pity party of yours is really getting on my nerves." Her voice dropped into a hiss. "And everyone is watching!"

It was true. Batchaser looked around camp to see cats gathered around, trying to get an idea of what all he commotion was about. But if anyone knew Batchaser, they'd know he didn't care if the attention was on him or not. "Oh, like I care," he spat. "They can think whatever they want, but at the end of the day, *I'm* the one that came from StarClan. Who do you think they'll listen to?"

Cloudflame looked hurt. "Don't do this, Batchaser. You don't even know what you're saying."

He scowled. "No, I know exactly what I'm saying. I'm going to RiverClan. I'd suggest everyone follow me if you want any chance of defeating Doestar."

"Batchaser!"

"What? They deserve to know." The black tom shouldered past Asterpaw and Cloudflame, blue gaze sweeping around the ShadowClan cats. "If you didn't already know, Doestar has already taken WindClan over. She's hitting RiverClan next. It'll be our last chance to stop her before she creates her LakeClan. So if you've given up and are content with dying, then stay here. But if you come with me, we have a chance at saving the Clans and saving StarClan."

"Saving- StarClan?" a cat stuttered out from the crowd.

Batchaser nodded. "Yes. If Doestar takes over the Clans, StarClan will be lost forever." He wasn't sure what would happen to him if such a thing occurred, but he could worry later.

He was met with silence for a moment. Clanmates began looking around at each other, clearly hesitating. Then, Gorsebrush stepped forward, dipping his head. "I'll come."

And then Fireshine followed, nodding. "I'll do anything in my power to save StarClan."

Foxshade sighed and took his place beside her. "I guess I will, even if I have to smell like fish while doing it."

A ripple of laughter echoed around the gathered cats. And before Batchaser knew it, several cats were joining him, eyes bright. His ear flicked back and he instinctively curled in on himself. He wasn't sure why they trusted him, or why they were so selfless, but he almost wondered what that was like. To follow someone- and not have to do it all yourself.

Cloudflame shook her head in disappointment. "You don't even realize you're leading all of them to their deaths."

Batchaser waved a paw. "Better than sitting around and letting Doestar take the Clans over without giving up a fight."

She glared at him. "You will regret this one day, Batchaser."

"I somehow doubt that."

Cloudflame flicked her tail angrily and turned away. "I'm staying here."

Batchaser narrowed his eyes. "Now who's the one leading their Clanmates to death?"

She whirled around and bared her teeth. "I'm staying here with the ones who can't fight! I do not intend to die anytime soon, Batchaser. RiverClan has two medicine cats, and I imagine that WindClan cats will assist the ranks that need filling. You may be giving up, but I am not."

"Giving up?" he snarled back, emotion welling in his throat. "I'm not the one giving up! I'm going to fight for the Clans' freedom- to save StarClan. Unlike you, I'm not staying behind, tucking my tail between my legs."

She scowled. "I think you're too obsessed with saving StarClan, Batchaser." Cloudflame tightened her muscles and turned. "I wish you luck. Goodbye," she said curtly.

Batchaser ground his teeth together and looked over at

Fireshine, motioning her over. The she-cat's tufted ears pricked and she made her way to him. Foxshade eyed them suspiciously from the corner. "I'm going to go ahead," Batchaser said. "Will you and Gorsebrush lead the others to RiverClan?"

Fireshine dipped her head. "Of course, Batchaser." She whirled on her paws and made her way to the middle of camp. "We are leaving soon! All cats who want to fight must come with me."

Realizing everything was under control, Batchaser let out a breath and walked out of camp. His claws dug into the ground and he flung himself into the foliage, brush prickling his black pelt as he walked. Anger bubbled in his chest, threatening to spill, eyes sparking with fire. Who was Cloudflame to judge him? At least he was *trying*, right?

The tom sighed and continued walking. He was at least looking forward to seeing his old friends again. Especially Jackalstar...he almost smiled, then it flickered away. What would she think of the way he looked now? Would she be disgusted? Disappointed, like Cloudflame? Would she pity him? Perhaps she'd even think he was weak. Thoughts like those swirled in his head, angrily hissing and battling.

However, everything dissolved away when he saw a shape slink through the shadows. Batchaser's eyes widened and his heartbeat slid irregularly in his chest. The tom dropped his body low, thanking the pines and darkness for shielding him from view, only his blue eyes visible against the territory. The cat luckily wasn't anyone he feared right now- not Doestar or Hivestripe. They were smaller in size, probably apprentice or young warrior age.... *Bumbletongue?* Suspicion arose, why would he be here? Was he spying?

Suddenly enraged, Batchaser leapt forward and slammed his paws into the cat's shoulders. A yelp reached his ears but he wasn't listening- all Batchaser could hear was his thundering heart, adrenaline pulsing through his veins. The black tom rolled on top of the cat and managed to pin them to the ground, panting, raising his paw-

Sunpaw stared back, terrified.

Batchaser's chest heaved with each labored breath. His eyes widened slowly and he quickly scampered off of the golden she-cat. "Wh-what are you doing here?"

The she-cat was silent as she stood, observing him carefully.

Oh. Batchaser turned his head to the side, shielding his missing ear from view. "Yes...." Shame filled his throat and ran his mouth dry. What could he say? How could he ever explain what had happened?

Sunpaw's gaze snapped from his ear to his face. "I'm here running an errand for my father."

Relieved by the subject change but worried by her tone, Batchaser frowned. "That doesn't sound good... What's going on?"

"Not good things." Sunpaw's white ears pinned to her head. "But he can't meet with you tonight- Doestar is keeping a close eye on him."

His eyes widened. "Is she suspicious?"

Sunpaw shuffled her paws uncertainly. "I...don't know. But it's not just Thymeclaw. She's watching *everyone* like a hawk today. I guess she really doesn't want to risk anything."

Batchaser made a face. "Not you, though?"

She huffed. "Nah, I stayed back in WindClan. She's near the barn with her supporters making plans. I managed to get away when my father distracted Hivestripe. I had to see you."

Batchaser nodded, listening.

Sunpaw breathed. "Doestar is attacking RiverClan at dawn. They're planning to flank the camp from all sides then attack, pinning everyone inside. She is not going to be merciful to Applestar."

The black tom's eyes widened. Wait, Shellstar had explained his great nephew was WindClan's leader. Batchaser couldn't remember the name, though. "What about WindClan's leader? Where is he?"

Sunpaw was quiet, clearly hesitating. "Dead," she finally mumbled.

Dead? Dear StarClan, there was no *way* for WindClan to succeed if their leader was gone. "Stars.... what about the deputy?"

"Imprisoned, with Spiderstar."

So Spiderstar's alive. Batchaser allowed his shoulders to smooth. "What is she planning to do with them?"

"I don't know, but Thymeclaw says she wants to make an example of them. I don't know what that means, though..."

"Kill?" he stuttered out in shock.

Sunpaw's eyes widened. "Is that what she means? She's going to *kill* them? But why- why hasn't she just done it already?"

"If she's going to make an example of them, it'll be in front of the Clans...."

Sunpaw stared at him, wide-eyed.

Batchaser snapped himself out of his thoughts, mind becoming less foggy. This helped- talking, planning, problem solving. Helped him get away from *those* thoughts, away from Cypressfall and Lynxbite and Cloudflame. He really was going to be fine. As long as he continued prevailing through this war, Batchaser was going to be okay. "Okay, so I can't meet Thymeclaw tonight," he mostly muttered under his breath, but he had Sunpaw, that's all that mattered. The black tom flicked his tail and turned back to the apprentice. "We'll be ready by then."

Sunpaw nodded, swallowing painfully. "Um. Do you-" Her ears pinned back to her head. "Do you think we'll win?"

Batchaser stared at her for a moment, gaze wavering. His mouth

was dry. "I truly hope so."

Silence spread between both cats as they lost themselves in thought. Batchaser couldn't stop thinking about Doestar- her fangs, her eyes, the way Spiderstar's limp body had fallen after her death. He shivered internally, heart beating in his ear, and looked at Sunpaw. The apprentice's gaze wavered back and forth, tail-tip twitching with clear worry.

Batchaser frowned, and something foreign inside him urged him to comfort Sunpaw. It was so... odd. He'd never felt that way before, especially not to cats from other Clans, but this was different. Every single cat Batchaser knew had a chance of dying at dawn, and he realized how much he'd changed from the snarky, hot-tempered StarClan tom.

So, listening to his instincts, Batchaser stepped forward and gently rested his paw on Sunpaw's shoulder. Her green gaze swiveled to him, shocked, but she otherwise stayed silent, trying to decipher his message. Batchaser offered a small smile and turned his head away toward the direction of RiverClan's territory. "We'll get through this," he promised.

Sunpaw swallowed, still staring at him. "What happened to-?" She cut herself off from the dreaded question when Batchaser visibly tensed, blue eyes widened with apprehension. Her ears pricked and she ducked her head, looking around the area. "Wh-what is it?"

Batchaser looked at her, blinking. "You can't hear that?"

"What? Hear what?"

"It's..." He shook his head. How could Batchaser, the cat with one ear, hear that? "A- a battle! It's a battle, Sunpaw, can't you hear? The screeching? The war cries?"

She shook her head desperately, stumbling back on pale golden paws. "No! I can't hear anything, Batchaser!"

A sudden, horrible headache started at his temple, spreading to

his entire head in a matter of seconds. He groaned, stumbling slightly, not realizing Sunpaw had caught his shoulders. Her questions didn't register to him; all Batchaser saw was a raging war, cats interlocked in battle, lips pulled back and claws unsheathed. The sounds echoed around him, filling his head like sand, flashes of blood and death pounding at the base of his skull.

"Batchaser! What's going on?!"

When he opened his eyes again, he was staring at Sunpaw, shivering. As snow pelted around them, sky washed with gray clouds, visions of Doestar's battle won, Batchaser could only muster a weak, horrified whisper: "It's happening now."

A/N: It's been two months, and for that I am dearly sorry. I really have no excuse other than re-planning the entire ending of this story (for the third time, might I add). I know this book hasn't been perfect, but I want to tie up as many loose ends by the end as possible and make it enjoyable for all of you!

So, what do you think? Little cliffhanger there! Hehe! Big things are coming, guys, so just wait.

I also urge you to check out another story I've been working on, *Washed in Black* . It's filling in the space for a roleplay I'm currently participating in, and I only have a few more chapters before I complete it! Anyway, just wanted to recommend it, I update it a little more frequently than Bound to Stars.

Thanks so much for all of your endless support. It means the world! Mwah!